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Negotiating an Identity : Portraits of the Sexual Identity Self-Labeling Process for Non-Heterosexual Women in Early Adulthood

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NEGOTIATING AN IDENTITY:
PORTRAITS OF THE SEXUAL IDENTITY SELF-LABELING PROCESS
FOR NON-HETEROSEXUAL WOMEN IN EARLY ADULthood

A DISSERTATION

Submitted to the Faculty of
Montclair State University in partial fulfillment
of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

by

STACY A. PINTO

Montclair State University

Upper Montclair, NJ

2018

Dissertation Chair: Dr. Dana Heller Levitt

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MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY

THE GRADUATE SCHOOL

DISSERTATION APPROVAL

We hereby approve the Dissertation

NEGOTIATING AN IDENTITY:

PORTRAITS OF THE SEXUAL IDENTITY SELF-LABELING PROCESS

FOR NON-HETEROSEXUAL WOMEN IN EARLY ADULTHOOD

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Abstract

The concept of sexual identity has been evolving for decades. While there has been research and theory on the development of sexual identity, researchers have paid little attention to what, specifically, influences individuals to adopt one label for their sexual identity over another. This study employed qualitative methods of research, based in portraiture, to gather and analyze data on three non-heterosexual, self-identified women in early adulthood, from a metropolitan area in the northeastern United States. Each participant's experience, as it relates to the labeling process for their sexual identity, is presented in its own portrait, and subsequently analyzed to highlight collective themes as they relate to the self-labeling process. The findings suggest that an individual may select the label for their sexual identity based on the nature and salience of their identities, as well as their knowledge of labeling options, the audience receiving the label, and any internalized stigma or bias. The insight into how an individual selects a label, provided by this study, implies that an individual's label carries meaning along a variety of dimensions, and offers direction for practice, advocacy, and future research.

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Dedication

To the women who were willing to open their hearts and share their stories for the sake of this research, and to everyone who has spent a lifetime—or even a moment—trying to fit a square peg into a round hole. We define our labels, they do not define us.

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Negotiating an Identity: Portraits of the Sexual Identity Self-Labeling Process for
Non-Heterosexual Women in Early Adulthood

Chapter One: Introduction

As helping professionals, counselors face the challenge of evolving with the landscape of an ever-changing society. Gates and Newport (2013) indicated that 3.5% of adults in the United States self-identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT). However, depending on how researchers define sexual orientation, it is postulated that up to 22% of individuals could be categorized as lesbian, gay, or bisexual (LGB, Korchmaros, Powell, & Stevens, 2013). Faced with a staggering difference of almost 20% between self-identifying as LGB, and being categorized as LGB (based on self-identified sexual orientation, sexual preference, or sexual behavior), counselors must be prepared to understand the complexities and implications of sexual identity, regardless of label, as well as the limitations of labels.

Generally, the terms *lesbian, gay, bisexual, or queer (LGBQ;* or some variation thereof) or *sexual minority* are used to refer to this community. Given the limits of language, this document uses the term *non-heterosexual* to refer to the population in question. Unlike *LGBQ* or *sexual minority*, the term *non-heterosexual* is not commonly used in the academic literature. Using this term helped me to focus on individuals who do not identify as heterosexual, while not limiting the participants to include only those individuals with specific labels or identities, as in the LGBQ acronym, or by “othering” the population through perpetuating their minority status by using the term *sexual minority*.

Historically, individuals who identify within sexual minority groups, or non-heterosexual individuals, tend to seek therapeutic services more often than individuals who do not identify in this way (Bieschke, Perez, & DeBord, 2007; Bradford, Ryan, & Rothblum, 1994; Liddle, 1997). Within the Competencies for Counseling with Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Queer, Questioning, Intersex, and Ally (LGBQQIA), provided by the Association for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Issues in Counseling (ALGBTIC), mental health practitioners are presented as having a history of pathologizing the LGBQ community (ALGBTIC LGBQQIA Competencies Taskforce, 2013). The disproportionate rate at which the LGBQ community pursues counseling services (Bieschke et al., 2007; Bradford et al., 1994; Liddle, 1997), combined with mental health practitioners historically misunderstanding the needs and nature of the LGBQ community (ALGBTIC LGBQQIA Competencies Taskforce, 2013), highlights the need for counselor competency in this area. The aforementioned competencies (ALGBTIC LGBQQIA Competencies Taskforce, 2013) provide a framework for counseling practice with LGBQQIA individuals; however, they do not address the subtle nuances surrounding the labeling or self-identification process(es) for an individual's sexual identity.

Sexual identity is a multidimensional concept, which requires further research and analysis on the factors that contribute to the self-identification, or labeling, process (Glover, Galliher, & Lamere, 2009). The term *sexual identity*, as used in this document, should be understood to refer to an individual's personal sense of themselves as someone of a specific sexual orientation (D'Augelli & Patterson, 1995). *Sexual orientation*, as used

in this document, “refers to the direction (sex, gender identity/expression(s)) an individual is predisposed to bond with and share affection emotionally, physically, spiritually, and/or mentally” (ALGBTIC LGBQQIA Competencies Taskforce, 2013, p. 38). The evolution of an individual’s sexual identity can be a complex process. For example, Klein (2014) identifies seven variables (i.e. sexual attraction, sexual behavior, sexual fantasies, emotional preference, social preference, self-identification and heterosexual/gay lifestyle) that contribute to an individual’s sexual orientation. However, these variables do not address how an individual assigns a label, or self-identified verbal representation, to their sexual identity. Although a significant amount of literature regarding sexual identity and sexual orientation has been generated during the twentieth century and in recent years, there has been a dearth of research on the development of an individual’s self-identification, or label, in relation to their sexual identity.

Researchers have recently noted a tendency of writers to critique methods of categorization or labeling as opposed to exploring the process that leads to the category or label (Few-Demo, 2014; McCall, 2005). There has also been a call for researchers to focus on the *process* of categorization instead of the *results* of categorization (Choo & Ferree, 2010; Few-Demo, 2014; Yuval-Davis, 2006). For example, concentrating research on how an individual comes to label themselves as “gay,” as opposed to the implications a label of “gay” has on an individual’s life. Researchers regularly discuss the development of an orientation or an identity, but neglect to address the connection between the internal combination of attributes (i.e. sexual orientation, sexual preference, and sexual behavior) and the adopted label, which is ultimately how an individual

chooses to express their sexual identity to others. An individual's choice of expression for their sexual identity, or their label, may represent a complex interaction of characteristics or identities, and should be understood beyond its face value.

Background

A review of the literature, which is presented in Chapter Two, offers a foundation for understanding the process of sexual identity development and the associated labeling process(es). This foundation includes a history of sexual identity development, the difference between sexual identity and sexual orientation, influencing factors and milestones, the concepts of self-identification/-labeling/-categorization, labeling terminology, and intersectionality. The literature explores the existing knowledge in the field, and highlights the gaps between what is known and what remains to be learned, and why.

Sexual Identity

D'Augelli and Patterson (1995) described sexual identity as a sense of oneself as an individual of a specific sexual orientation, suggesting that the two concepts, sexual identity and sexual orientation, are directly related to one another, with one informing the other. However, more recent inquiry (Lev, 2004) built upon D'Augelli and Patterson's (1995) definition, conceptualizing sexual identity as an umbrella term, representing four elements. The four elements of sexual identity were identified as biological sex, gender role, gender identity, and sexual orientation. Biological sex can be understood on a basic level as the female and male binary categories. Gender role is how an individual expresses traditionally masculine or feminine characteristics within their cultural context,

and is often reflective of an individual's gender identity, but may or may not be related to biological sex or gender identity. Gender identity is the internal experience of one's gender. Finally, sexual orientation is the internal perception of one's emotional/romantic and sexual attraction (Lev, 2004). This more recent understanding of sexual identity highlights the difference between sexual identity and sexual orientation in that sexual identity is representative of a larger constellation of identities. This definition of sexual identity also brings attention to the fact that the understanding of sexual identity has grown over the years.

Common labels, such as gay, lesbian, and bisexual are frequently used interchangeably to express both sexual identity and sexual orientation. This can make it difficult for counselors and the larger society to discern between the separate meanings of sexual identity and sexual orientation. Since sexual identity is viewed as the sum of a collection of identities (Lev, 2004), one of which is sexual orientation, the two concepts are not synonymous.

Aside from the aforementioned elements of sexual identity, the research indicates that there are many influences related to this concept. Influencing factors include biology, sociocultural influences, gender roles, sexual orientation as it relates to sexual development (Burri, Cherkas, Spector, & Rahman, 2011; Edwards & Brooks, 1999; Felson, 2011), environment, and genes (Epstein, McKinney, Fox, & Garcia, 2012; Hayes & Hagedorn, 2001). The presence of members of the non-heterosexual community in the media and popular culture also has a significant influence on the construction and expression of identity by normalizing the experience and expression of a lesbian, gay,

bisexual, or queer (LGBQ) identity (Floyd & Stein, 2002; Gomillion & Giuliano, 2011; Hayes & Hagedorn, 2001).

Early models of sexual identity development (e.g., Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1982; Troiden, 1988b) described the process as occurring exclusively for non-heterosexual individuals of various labels. However, current research suggests that the development of a sexual identity takes place for individuals of all identities and orientations, but the process is normalized for majority groups, often causing it to be overlooked in heterosexual individuals (Dillon, Worthington, & Moradi, 2011). This suggests that non-heterosexual individuals are more aware of, and have likely engaged in more self-reflection regarding their sexual identity than their heterosexual counterparts.

Many conceptualizations approach sexual identity development using a stage model (e.g., Cass, 1979; Fassinger & Miller, 1997; Mohr & Fassinger, 2000; Troiden, 1988b), while others focus on independent tasks associated with identity development (e.g., D'Augelli, 1994b; Glover et al., 2009). While both approaches have contributed to the current understanding of sexual identity, the literature does not thoroughly examine how individuals select the language, or label, that they use to verbally express their sexual identity.

The evolution of sexual identity and orientation development, with a focus on stage models, has brought the academic community to view sexual identity as a combination of many variables or dimensions of an individual. This perspective can be described as a multidimensional understanding of sexual identity (Bregman, Malik, Page, Makynen, & Lindahl, 2013; Diamond, 2005; Epstein et al., 2012; Kinsey, Pomeroy, &

Martin, 1948; Kinsey, Pomeroy, Martin, & Gebhard, 1953; Klein, 2014; Korchmaros et al., 2013; Mohr & Fassinger, 2000; Rosario, Schrimshaw, Hunter, & Braun, 2006). The modern academic perception of both sexual identity and orientation suggests that society's general knowledge of labels associated with these concepts does not fully represent the intricacies beyond each label (Epstein et al., 2012; Korchmaros et al., 2013). This is illustrated, again, by Klein's (2014) theorizing of sexual orientation, which identifies seven variables (i.e., sexual attraction, sexual behavior, sexual fantasies, emotional preference, social preference, self-identification and heterosexual/gay lifestyle) that contribute to an individual's sexual orientation. Klein's (2014) variables do not directly address socio-cultural influences, or include gender, which Lev (2004) noted as being a significant part of sexual identity.

Self-Identification, -Labeling, and -Categorization

To fully understand sexual identity, it is important to view it through a lens that examines the process of self-identification, which is also referred to as self-labeling and/or self-categorization. Common labels for sexual identity such as homosexual, heterosexual, and bisexual, as understood by the general public, mistakenly imply that there is consistency between measures of sexuality, including sexual identity label, sexual preference, and sexual behavior (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1989; Igartua, Thombs, Burgos, & Montoro, 2009; Korchmaros et al., 2013; Laumann, 1994; Rosario et al., 2006; Rust, 1992). However, more recently, the role of labeling in modern society has come into question based on research that indicates fluidity in sexuality and associated identities (Diamond, 2005; Epstein et al., 2012). The issue manifests when comparing an

individual's label with their sexual behavior(s), sexual fantasies, and sexual attraction, often resulting in inconsistency (Epstein et al., 2012; Vrangalova & Savin-Williams, 2010).

Additionally, labels carry assumptions that can make it challenging for individuals to select an appropriate label and to adopt a stable identity (i.e., a longitudinally consistent label) if they do not experience consistency between the aforementioned measures of sexuality (Diamond, 2005). The lack of stability in an individual's identity and associated fluctuating patterns of self-identification based on context can create cognitive dissonance, or mental stress, for the individual (Diamond, 2005). Since individuals are driven toward internal consistency (Festinger, 1962), the psychological discomfort motivates individuals toward resolving the source of the inconsistency.

Furthermore, an individual's adopted label, at any specific moment in time, has the potential to influence them to engage in sexual activity that is congruent with that label (Rosario et al., 2006). This further complicates the process of both identity development and self-identification. Based on the fact that culture and language in the United States rely heavily on categorization, researchers (e.g., Diamond, 2005; Epstein et al., 2012; Glover et al., 2009) cite concern over the concept of forsaking labels completely, indicating that labels do have a purpose. This concern suggests that individuals will continue to label themselves, but does not indicate how the labeling process may ultimately evolve. Diamond (2005) notes that self-identification often has meaning for the individual, but is not indicative of the individual's experience or identity

to others. This highlights the importance of examining the labels that individuals use, and identifying what the label could or does represent for each person, both in theory and practice.

Labeling Theory

Labeling is the process by which people or things are classified based on specific characteristics (Dictionary.com, 2016). Labeling Theory (Becker, 1963) is founded on the notion that social groups establish norms, and anyone that violates those norms is labeled as an “outsider” or “deviant.” Becker (1963) further indicates that a label has the potential to influence an individual to engage in behaviors consistent with the assigned label, identify with the label, and is also directly associated with discriminatory practices against those identified as “outsiders.”

Labeling Theory (Becker, 1963), when applied to sexual identity and the associated self-labeling or –identification process(es), suggests that an individual’s adopted label, or assigned label based on behavior, attractions, or any other quality, will influence them to maintain consistency with that label. This tendency to assume the labeled identity or the role of the “outsider” may limit an individual’s ability for self-discovery and/or to live congruently. An individual who is sexually intimate with someone of the same sex, through a lens of Labeling Theory (Becker, 1963), may be labeled as “gay” by their community, and may subsequently adopt the “gay” label, regardless of its accuracy.

While Labeling Theory (Becker, 1963) has been used to conceptualize the process of labeling in the past, it has a variety of limitations. Becker’s (1963) theory limits the

conceptualization to a focus on the effect of labeling on an individual's behavior, as opposed to providing an account of how a confluence of influences relate to both an individual's label and behavior. It also carries an assumption of aberrance regarding non-heterosexual identities. Although Labeling Theory (Becker, 1963) provides a foundation for understanding the labeling process, it is important to consider a broad range of influences and implications around labeling in the current sociocultural context.

Women in Early Adulthood

The sexuality of women tends to be more fluid and flexible than that of men, while remaining within the socially constructed norms of sexuality (Bader, 2009; Diamond & Butterworth, 2008; Peplau & Garnets, 2000). In addition, women display more inconsistency in both sexual and romantic attraction than their male counterparts (Peplau & Garnets, 2000). Although identity and the associated developmental processes are important throughout the lifespan, the process during early adulthood, from 26 through 35 years of age (Wong, Hall, Justice, & Hernandez, 2015), offers a unique cross-section of an individual's sexual development.

Developmental models (Erikson, 1968; Levinson, 1978; Schaie & Willis, 2000) suggest that individuals in early adulthood have begun to develop a secure sense of their identity, a desire to achieve intimacy and engage in reciprocal relationships, and have reached sexual maturation. Generally, sexual orientation is stable for most individuals by this stage in development (Diamond, 2003; Diamond & Wallen, 2011; Savin-Williams & Ream, 2007). Additionally, research suggests that individuals at this life stage are concerned with both the quantity and quality of social interaction (Carmichael, Reis, &

Duberstein, 2015), which provides motivation for individuals to pursue relationships that they find to be fulfilling, as opposed to pursuing relationships that fulfill societal obligations or expectations. With the focus of the research on women in early adulthood, as described here, this study's participants were at a developmental intersection of identities that offers the option of variability in sexuality, as well as confidence regarding their sexual identity. This intersection positioned them to reflect thoughtfully on their experience as it relates to the label for their sexual identity.

Statement of the Problem

As society's understanding of sexual identities has evolved, terminology used to classify the varied identities within the LGBTQ population has grown. A significant portion of the research surrounding this topic has focused on an individual's development of their personal identity, including their attitudes, attractions, and beliefs (Korchmaros et al., 2013). However, it is crucial to understand how individuals select a label, or choose not to do so, for their sexual identity within the greater context of a label-driven society.

The preoccupation with labels in the United States limits the individual's ability to avoid applying a label to their sexual identity, while the limited labeling options considered to be acceptable offers a forced choice. The concept of labeling, or categorization, provides a certain level of safety, but the idea of abandoning the use of commonly understood terminology creates challenges (Diamond, 2005; Epstein et al., 2012; Glover et al., 2009). It is, therefore, important that counseling professionals and researchers understand the experience of individuals in selecting, or not selecting, a label for their sexual identity. This understanding will help to more fully comprehend an

individual's expression of their identity, the purpose for their selected label, and what it may represent (e.g. protection against judgment/stigma/oppression; permission to explore different types of relationships in the future).

Comparing the historical understanding of binary categories of sexual orientation and identity, heterosexual and homosexual, to the seemingly limitless number of labels used in the present day (Callis, 2014) highlights certain questions. Have we created new identities and corresponding expressions? Alternatively, has our knowledge of identities, and the differences between people, simply grown so much that a binary perspective is unrealistic in the United States? Will it continue to grow, and what will that look like?

Researchers (e.g., Baltar, 1998; Diamond, 2005; Epstein et al., 2012; Glover et al., 2009; Holden & Holden, 1995; Rothblum, 2000) discuss the concept of completely abandoning labels regarding sexual identity. However, it has been argued that labeling has a place in the process of identity development (Goffman, 1959; Scales Rostosky, Riggle, Pascale-Hague, & McCants, 2010; Scimecca, 1977). While the labeling phenomenon extends across age groups and gender identities, the literature cites significant developmental and sociocultural differences across these intersections (Bader, 2009; Diamond & Butterworth, 2008; Erikson, 1968; Levinson, 1978; Murray, Pope, & Willis, 2016; Peplau & Garnets, 2000; Schaie & Willis, 2000; Wong et al., 2015). For this reason, it may be helpful to study individual cross-sections of the non-heterosexual population.

Women in early adulthood have a unique constellation of characteristics in this respect, including the perceived option of sexual fluidity (Bader, 2009; Diamond &

Butterworth, 2008; Peplau & Garnets, 2000), and a relatively secure (Erikson, 1968; Levinson, 1978; Schaie & Willis, 2000) sense of a stable sexual identity (Diamond, 2003; Diamond & Wallen, 2011; Savin-Williams & Ream, 2007). The intersection of identities for non-heterosexual women in early adulthood suggest that these individuals will be relatively confident in their sexual identity without ruling out the option for sexual fluidity. These characteristics have the potential to position young adult women to generate rich, narrative details regarding the experience of assigning a label to their sexual identity.

Research Question

This study addressed the following research question: How do non-heterosexual women in early adulthood experience the process for selecting the current label for their sexual identity?

Considering the research in this area has generally focused on identity development (Bailey, 2003; Bregman et al., 2013; Cass, 1979; D'Augelli, 1994b; Erikson & Erikson, 1998; Fassinger & Miller, 1997; LeVay, 1994; Marcia, 1966; Milton & MacDonald, 1984; Mohr & Fassinger, 2000; Mohr & Kendra, 2011; Troiden, 1988b), more research is needed to explore the process of *labeling* one's sexual identity. This study helped to highlight the connection between an individual's internal understanding of their sexual identity and their label, and the verbal expression of their sexual identity across social locations. This connection places an individual's label into context, representing their intersecting identities, and providing much more information than simply the gender identity to whom that individual is attracted. This study focused on the

unique experiences of non-heterosexual women in early adulthood to create a foundation for this line of inquiry. This population was selected based on their perceived confidence (Erikson, 1968; Levinson, 1978; Schaie & Willis, 2000), stability (Diamond, 2003; Diamond & Wallen, 2001; Savin-Williams & Ream, 2007), and variability (Bader, 2009; Diamond & Butterworth, 2008; Peplau & Garnets, 2000) regarding their sexuality and sexual identity, as previously discussed.

Significance of the Study

As society develops toward a more open understanding of one another, the opportunities for individuals to not only coexist, but to nurture one another into healthy, productive individuals increase. This study offers new information regarding the self-labeling process for non-heterosexual early adult women, which contributes to a fresh perspective from which to view ourselves and one another. This ‘fresh perspective’ may assist both professional counselors and the general population in understanding individuals with whom they come into contact, and serves as a platform for additional research with varied populations (e.g. men, older adults).

The study’s focus on non-heterosexual early adult women allowed this line of inquiry to begin with individuals who are uniquely positioned to reflect on this phenomenon. The population in question are likely aware of their sexual identity development process (i.e., non-heterosexual, Dillon et al., 2011), are suggested to be more sexually fluid (i.e., women, Bader, 2009; Diamond & Butterworth, 2008; Peplau & Garnets, 2000), and are at a time in their lives when they may be settling into their identity (i.e., young adult, Erikson, 1968; Levinson, 1978; Schaie & Willis, 2000). These

characteristics allow for variability in identity and experience, with the assumption that the participants have started to establish a secure sense of themselves as a non-heterosexual individual.

Through the use of rich data collection, analysis, and description, presented in a format that is accessible to academics, professionals, and the public alike (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997), this study highlights what contributes to the selection of a label, and what labels could mean outside of their traditionally implicit or academic meanings. Such knowledge could increase cultural competency, which will help counseling practitioners to better meet clients' needs and recognize the intersecting identities that contribute to the development of an individual's label. A thorough examination of the labeling process may also assist counselors in exploring and identifying sources of cognitive dissonance with clients. Finally, an increase in this dimension of cultural competency will prepare counselors to more effectively fulfill the role of advocate for their clients (American Counseling Association, 2014).

The idea of completely abandoning the process and safety of labeling carries questions, consequences, and confusion for many individuals (Diamond, 2005; Epstein et al., 2012; Glover et al., 2009). Human nature is to compartmentalize and categorize (Durkheim, Mauss, & Needham, 1963), suggesting that it is unlikely for society to significantly deviate from the use of labels in the foreseeable future. However, embracing a broad range of defined categories, an understanding of the limits of those categories, and/or a continuum of possibilities is critical to counselors and other helping professionals in order to assist clients in accurately identifying their lived experiences,

and to assist clients in making meaning of their lived experiences. The mental health community accepts that incongruence, or having some part of one's self-image distorted, is a primary source of psychological distress (Rogers, 1959; Rosario et al., 2006). By encouraging the use of a limited number of general, assumption-carrying labels, society may be offering individuals no choice but to adopt a label that is at odds with, or not truly representative of, their true self. Counselors can struggle to provide comprehensive services to clients who identify with any label due to the limited knowledge of the range and meaning of sexual identity expression that currently exists both within and outside of the LGBTQ community, its allies and advocates, and professionals within the discipline of LGBTQ studies (Floyd & Stein, 2002; Korchmaros et al., 2013).

Exposure to an expanded knowledge base around the influences behind an individual's selection of a label for their sexual identity will position professionals to more accurately understand and explore the experiences of individuals across the range of sexual identities. Additionally, professionals will benefit from the discussion of the concept that even though an individual self-selects the label to outwardly describe their sexual identity, it is possible, and likely, that the label does not express the *totality* of their sexual identity, and that the label is not static. With the understanding that sexual identity is a multidimensional construct, this study provides context for both individuals and professionals to recognize not only what labels do not represent (e.g., academic definition), but what they could and do represent for an individual's true meaning and significance of labels. This context could help counselors to more effectively navigate the concept of sexual identity and to understand their clients from a holistic perspective.

Positionality

As the researcher my values, beliefs, and assumptions had the potential to influence how this study was designed and the data were evaluated. As a non-heterosexual self-identified woman in early adulthood, I am a member of the population identified for this research. Personal, academic, and professional influences have familiarized me with the population in question from various perspectives. In addition to a broad relationship with this population, the line of inquiry that this study explored had a personal level of importance to me, given my perceived and persistent incongruence between my experience and label for my sexual identity.

As a member of this community, I was uniquely situated to carry out this study, and likewise was faced with unique challenges. Given the fact that I have already assessed my own experience, I have an understanding of how I selected the label for my sexual identity based on limited labeling options and a preference for same-sex romantic relationships. This positionality influenced the execution and analysis of this study because of my preconceived assumptions regarding potential labeling influences, and, subsequently, the study's results.

In addition to my personal identification with the population being studied, my constellation of identities had the potential to impact this study. I identify as a white, cisgender, American, Christian, middle-class, highly educated, lesbian woman who was born and raised in a heterosexual two-parent family, with two siblings (one of whom is straight and one of whom is gay), in a suburban area of a large city in the Northeastern United States. While I consider myself an insider to the community that was studied, I

was an outsider to many intersecting identities held by the study's sample, including race, education, first language, and country of origin. The privilege associated with my identities in context influenced the construction and framework of the study, the conversation during the interviews, and the analysis of the study. While I attempted to design the study in a way that was open and inclusive, the differences in my identity and the identities of the study's participants required that I actively inquire and engage in independent research about such issues as nuances in language, cultural and family norms, and expectations and practices associated with professional cultural that were presented by the participants.

It was important to acknowledge and address the impact of my position and identities on the current study. The discussion of my perception helps to frame this study, and possibly offer sensitivity to the research, which assisted in building rapport and engaging in meaningful dialogue with the participants (Singhal, 2014). The management and mindfulness of my positionality as it informed the execution and analysis of this study is discussed in Chapter Three.

Intersectionality as a Theoretical Framework

This study was conducted using a qualitative approach, based on methodology described by portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997), to be discussed in Chapter Three. The concept of intersectionality was the basis for this study.

Intersectionality highlights the significance of acknowledging an individual's multiple identities, conceptualized from a perspective of privilege and power (Parent, DeBlaere, & Moradi, 2013; Shields, 2008), and how these identities have the power to influence one

another. Specifically, intersectionality explores how power or privilege in one area may influence an individual's identity development in another, and how an individual's identities create a unique intersecting location, so the identities are no longer considered discretely.

Intersectionality cannot predict human behavior (Syed, 2010). However, by using intersectionality as a framework for research, the researcher is afforded a functional paradigm from which to conceptualize a specific identity related phenomenon (Cole, 2009). Syed (2010) stresses the importance of considering multiple identities when conceptualizing an individual's development in order to understand the salience of each identity within the context of an individual's intersecting identities. Finally, the use of intersectionality as a framework calls specifically for qualitative research methods, such as in-depth interviews (Shields, 2008; Syed, 2010). Shields (2008) indicated that the use of intersectionality as a framework lends itself well to qualitative research methods. As discussed by Syed (2010), a goal of using intersectionality as a framework for research in the social sciences is to generate theory based in intersectionality. Intersectionality-based theory will provide a foundation for additional research and a guide for quantitative research on intersectionality (Cole, 2009).

A theoretical framework of intersectionality guided not only the methodology, but also the interpretation of data for this study. This framework helped me to explore how the study's participants navigate their multiple identities in regard to the construction of their label (Choo & Ferree, 2010; Few-Demo, 2014; Few-Demo, Humble, Curran, & Lloyd, 2016; Hancock, 2007). With intersectionality as its theoretical framework (Few-

Demo, 2014), this study was designed to address, conceptualize, and analyze the salience of prominent identities of the study's participants, how they intersect into unique lived experiences of privilege and oppression, and if/how they may influence the adoption of a specific label.

Chapter Summary

The labeling process is a complex journey that will take much research and analysis to understand. Both sexuality and labeling are implicit parts of everyday life and language. Researchers have discussed the developmental process(es) associated with sexual identity, but there is a dearth of literature regarding the act of labeling one's sexual identity. This chapter provides a justification for the examination of the labeling process for non-heterosexual self-identified early adult women.

Organization of the Dissertation

This dissertation is presented in five chapters. The first chapter included an introduction to the topic, background information, a statement of the problem and purpose for this study, and an overview of key terms. Chapter Two includes a critical analysis of existing literature as it pertains to the current study. The third chapter outlines the methodology of the study. Chapter Four provides an overview of the study's findings, with focus on the presentation of an individual, narrative portrait of each participant. Finally, Chapter Five discusses the study's results, limitations, and implications.

Definition of Terms

Research suggests a number of terms that are imperative to understanding this topic. In an effort for consistency, this section defines significant terms and phrases, as discussed in this document.

Bisexual: Identifying as “bisexual” describes “a man or woman who is emotionally, physically, mentally, and/or spiritually orientated to bond and share affection with men and women” (ALGBTIC LGBTQIA Competencies Taskforce, 2013, p. 39)

Cisgender: “An individual whose gender identity aligns with the sex and gender they were assigned at birth” (ALGBTIC LGBTQIA Competencies Taskforce, 2013, p. 39)

Coming out: “a personal (coming out to oneself) process of understanding, accepting, and valuing one’s affectional orientation and gender identity, and an interpersonal (coming out to others) process of sharing that information with others. This is a continual process that occurs multiple times for LGBTQIA persons over the course of their lifetimes. Although many people think that one is either “out” or “in,” this usually refers to a person’s general openness with others about who he or she is. However, each time an individual encounters a new situation with new people, one must assess how safe and/or comfortable one is in sharing this information. Coming out involves exploring one’s affectional orientation and/or gender identity and sharing this journey with others including family, friends, employees/employers/coworkers, and so on. Many times this process can be arduous and difficult because of heterosexism, sexism, genderism, homophobia, biphobia, transphobia, and so on. There are many different models which

describe the process and lifelong development of LGBTQQIA persons.” (ALGBTIC LGBTQQIA Competencies Taskforce, 2013, pp. 39-40)

Early adulthood: a developmental stage from ages 26 through 35 that is categorized by a “focus on establishing personal and economic independence, career development, and, for many selecting a mate, possibly starting a family, and rearing children” (Wong et al., 2015, p. 13)

Gay: “A man who is emotionally, physically, mentally and/or spiritually oriented to bond and share affection with other men. Also used sometimes as an umbrella term, referring to individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, queer, and/or bisexual” (ALGBTIC LGBTQQIA Competencies Taskforce, 2013, p. 40)

Gender: “Reflects one’s identity and expression (clothing, pronoun choice, how you walk, talk, carry yourself) as women, men, androgynous, transgender, genderqueer, gender nonconforming, and so on that may or may not line up as socially constructed with one’s biological sex. Social constructions are made within each culture for what is deemed appropriate for one’s gender identity and expression, however, sometimes a person’s gender identity expression does not fit traditional socially constructed categories (e.g., one’s sex and gender are congruent the way that people should behave and present themselves based on their gender)” (ALGBTIC LGBTQQIA Competencies Taskforce, 2013, p. 40)

Gender identity: Gender identity “refers to the inner sense of being a man, a woman, both, or neither. Gender identity usually aligns with a person’s birth sex but sometimes does not” (ALGBTIC LGBTQQIA Competencies Taskforce, 2013, p. 40)

Heterosexual: This is a term that is used to describe an individual who is emotionally, physically, mentally, and/or spiritually oriented to bond and share affection with those of the “opposite” sex. Although most people are familiar with this term, the authors felt it important to note that many people who are heterosexual prefer this term over the use of the term *straight* because the term *straight* infers “correctness.” (ALGBTIC LGBQQIA Competencies Taskforce, 2013; D'Augelli & Patterson, 1995)

Homosexual: Homosexual “is a term used historically to describe an individual who is emotionally, physically, mentally, and/or spiritually oriented to bond and share affection with those of the “same” sex. Note that many LGBTTQIA individuals do not use this term to describe themselves given the pejorative history associated with its use (i.e., use of *homosexual* in the *DSM* and other clinical studies that classified homosexuality as a mental disorder), and therefore it is not used in this document either” (ALGBTIC LGBQQIA Competencies Taskforce, 2013, p. 41)

Intersectionality: “the relationships among multiple dimensions and modalities of social relations and subject formations” (McCall, 2005, p. 1771)

Label: the term of identification that an individual uses to outwardly express their sexual orientation to others

Lesbian: “A woman who is emotionally, physically, mentally, and/or spiritually oriented to bond and share affection with other women” (ALGBTIC LGBQQIA Competencies Taskforce, 2013, p. 42)

Monosexual: an individual attracted to one gender identity

Non-heterosexual: an individual who does not identify with an opposite sex oriented monosexual sexual identity

Queer: understood as an umbrella term; “refers to individuals who identify outside of the heteronormative imperative and/or the gender binary (e.g., those from the LGBTQQIA community, individuals who are opposed to marriage, individuals who practice polyamory).” (ALGBTIC LGBTQQIA Competencies Taskforce, 2013, p. 42)

Sexual orientation: sometimes referred to as *affectional orientation*, “refers to the direction (sex, gender identity/expression(s)) an individual is predisposed to bond with and share affection emotionally, physically, spiritually, and/or mentally.” (ALGBTIC LGBTQQIA Competencies Taskforce, 2013, p. 38)

Sexual orientation self-identity/identification: The label or identification that an individual uses to outwardly express their sexual orientation to others.

Sexual identity: Sexual identity, sometimes referred to as lesbian identity or gay identity, for example, is a sense of oneself as an individual of a certain sexual orientation (D'Augelli & Patterson, 1995).

They/their: “Some individuals choose these plural pronouns as singular gender neutral pronouns over the use of *hir* or *ze* [recently adopted gender neutral pronouns] because they are already in use in language, and therefore some may find them more appealing.” (ALGBTIC LGBTQQIA Competencies Taskforce, 2013, p. 43)

Chapter Two: Literature Review

The 21st century has brought a proliferation in scholars departing from historical perspectives of sexual identity, toward an increasingly fluid, multidimensional view of the concept (Diamond, 2005; Epstein et al., 2012). The tendency toward acquiring a more comprehensive view of this aspect of an individual's identity suggests a need to deconstruct the concept, intentionally exploring its composition. For the purpose of this document, the focus will be on self-identification, or the active adoption of a label, and what influences how an individual outwardly identifies or labels their sexual identity. The academic community conceptualizes the development of sexual identity, but does not focus on the process of selecting a label for one's sexual identity, given the plethora of identification options available in modern society (Bailey, 2003; Bregman et al., 2013; Cass, 1979; D'Augelli, 1994a; Erikson & Erikson, 1998; Fassinger & Miller, 1997; LeVay, 1994; Marcia, 1966; Milton & MacDonald, 1984; Mohr & Fassinger, 2000; Mohr & Kendra, 2011; Troiden, 1988a).

The population for this study, young adult women who do not self-identify as heterosexual, will hereafter be referred to as non-heterosexual. Terms such as *lesbian*, *gay*, *bisexual* or *queer (LGBQ)* and *sexual minority* are often used in academic literature and colloquial language to discuss the population in question. I will use the term *non-heterosexual* in an effort to be inclusive of individuals who identify using any, or no terms, for their sexual identity, while not "othering" the community in question by explicitly highlighting their status as a minority group. While this term may still imply a level of heterosexual privilege in certain contexts, the choice to identify the population

for this study using this language was made specifically to capture the experience of individuals who did not identify with a monosexual, opposite gender oriented sexual identity.

From generation to generation, society's acceptance and understanding of people who are "different" grows. With this growth comes change in the meaning of sexual identity, sexual orientation, and, supposedly, related self-identification. What was once considered to be black-and-white – gay or straight – is now a grey-scale, consisting of gay, straight, bisexual, queer, pansexual, fluid, open, and any number of identities that individuals choose to adopt (Callis, 2014; Diamond, 2008). What influences an individual to select one label for their sexual identity over another? Self-identification carries insight into an individual's world. It can be black-and-white, or it can be contextual, a manifestation of a variety of intersecting influences and identities. Working to understand the pathway toward self-identification will assist counselors and counselor educators in understanding their clients, students, and peers more comprehensively, and may help individuals to understand their sexual identity in new, liberating ways.

A variety of salient topics emerged throughout the relevant literature. These topics include, but are not limited to, sexual identity development, the difference between sexual identity and sexual orientation, influencing factors and milestones, identity construction, a multidimensional perspective of sexual identity, self-identification and labeling, multiple minority statuses, age and cohort, and religion. Throughout the literature, a tension between developmental and contextual perspectives of sexual identity was evident. This tension contextualizes the purpose of this research. An overview of the

related research, presented here, offers a foundation for this line of inquiry and informed the design and analysis of the study.

Developmental Perspectives of Sexual Identity

A foundational knowledge of sexual identity, as a whole, is critical to understanding how an individual adopts a label for their sexual identity. The literature has acknowledged the influence that historical and cultural contexts may have on an individual's sexual identity development. Notable legal and social advances over the last 50 years, from the Stonewall riots of 1969 (Carter, 2005) to the legalization of same-sex marriage in the U.S. in 2015 (*Obergefell v. Hodges*, 2015), have influenced both tolerance and acceptance of non-heterosexual identities. Subsequently, attention from the academic community and visibility within the popular media has increased. This attention has allowed for greater understanding and more accessible role models and resources within the queer community. These changes also bring into focus the generational and cohort differences in sexual identity development for non-heterosexual individuals. For example, Parks (1999) found that the historical period during which an individual's sexual identity develops has an impact on awareness, labeling, and coming out.

It is also important to articulate the difference between sexual identity and sexual orientation. Throughout the literature, the two terms are sometimes used interchangeably. However, the implications associated with either term can be vastly different. Sexual orientation, as defined by the American Psychological Association (2012), is based on the sex of the individual to whom one is affectionally *and* sexually attracted. The definition goes on to mention the specific labels of homosexual, heterosexual, and bisexual, but

acknowledges that sexual orientation can be fluid and occurs on a continuum. Sexual identity, however, is defined as an individual's perception of their own sexuality, an intersection of their biological sex, gender role, gender identity, and sexual orientation. It may not mention specific categories of identification, but is understood to exist in a fluid capacity (Lev, 2004). The difference between these terms, as articulated here, is based on 21st century definitions. The language used to discuss each of the theories mentioned in this section is based on the language used in the original work.

A developmental perspective of sexual identity has been the dominant approach for decades. Though it has been conceptualized differently over time (Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1982; Cox & Gallois, 1996; Fassinger & Miller, 1997; Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1995; Morris, 1997; Parks, 1999; Rust, 1992; Sophie, 1986; Troiden, 1988b), the historical literature has offered a perspective of sexual identity that is saturated with developmental considerations. Throughout the past 40 years, scholars have worked to explain the development of sexual identity through biological theories (Bailey, 2003; LeVay, 1994), stage theories (Cass, 1979; Erikson & Erikson, 1998; Marcia, 1966; Troiden, 1988b), and life span models (D'Augelli, 1994a). The more commonly understood and referenced models (Cass, 1979; Fassinger & Miller, 1997; Milton & MacDonald, 1984; Troiden, 1989) cite the beginning of sexual orientation/identity formation as the questioning of one's heterosexuality. The developmental models generally suggest that an individual moves from a lack of awareness of their sexual orientation/identity to a state of awareness, then to a state of pride or empowerment, and completes the process by integrating their sexual orientation into their full identity. These

models have been heavily critiqued over the years (Eliason, 1996; Horowitz & Newcomb, 2002; Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1995; Rosario, Schrimshaw, & Hunter, 2008). Regardless of their critiques, the models serve as a framework for discussing the process of establishing a non-heterosexual identity, illuminate the evolution of society's understanding of sexual identity, and provide a foundation for understanding the process of label selection.

Cass's (1979) Theoretical Model of Homosexual Identity Formation

Cass's (1979) model of homosexual identity development is one of the more widely referenced approaches. Cass offers a linear model of development founded on the assumptions "that identity is acquired through a developmental process" and "that locus for stability of, and change in, behavior lies in the interaction process that occurs between individuals and their environments" (Cass, 1979, p. 219). Though the theory acknowledges a relationship between an individual and their environment, the model is restrictive in nature and does not fully account for context from multiple dimensions. Cass (1979) identified six sequential stages of homosexual identity development: (1) Identity Confusion, (2) Identity Comparison, (3) Identity Tolerance, (4) Identity Acceptance, (5) Identity Pride, and (6) Identity Synthesis. Though the stages were presented as occurring in order, the cycle may repeat throughout an individual's life. This model has served as a foundation on which many other models attempting to understand the non-heterosexual identity have been built.

During the first stage, Identity Confusion, an individual has their first awareness of non-heterosexual emotions or attractions, often accompanied by confusion, turmoil,

and self-alienation related to the possibility of being gay. Identity Comparison, stage two, is the time during which an individual begins to come to compare their identity with their peers and come to terms with the possibility of a non-heterosexual identity, and how their life might be impacted. In the Identity Tolerance stage, the individual begins to seek out others with similar identities, combating the social alienation that took place during previous stages; their commitment to their new identity has grown and continues to grow during this stage. The fourth stage, Identity Acceptance, is the stage during which an individual begins to accept their new identity, attaching positive connotations to their non-heterosexual identity, moving from tolerance of this identity to embracing it, and finding balance between their public and private selves. Identity Pride, stage five, is often when an individual “comes out,” and is characterized by an inflated value of the homosexual identity along with decreased value of heterosexual identity, and immersion in LGBQ culture. Finally, Identity Synthesis, stage six, is an overall integration of the non-heterosexual identity with other personal identities.

As one of the first models to normalize, as opposed to pathologize, the experience of non-heterosexual identified individuals, Cass’s (1979) model was a pivotal point in LGBQ research. The model and associated research set the stage for conceptualizing identity development for this population. However, Cass’s (1979) model has a number of shortcomings when considered in the current cultural climate. This model does not take into account the influence of sociocultural factors. Additionally, the model suggests that individuals must experience all six stages in order to develop fully into a well-adjusted individual, which is a restrictive approach to identity development. Finally, and directly

associated with the current research, this is a model for “homosexual” identity development and does not acknowledge or address identity development for individuals of other non-heterosexual identities. While the model is a cornerstone of the field of LGBTQ research, progress in both the field and society draw question to its validity.

Coleman’s (1982) Developmental Stages of Coming Out

The process of “coming out” can be understood as an individual’s lifelong process of coming to fully accept and share their identity with others. This process occurs when an individual is first discovering or developing their identity, but also whenever an individual is in a new situation, around new people, or forms new relationships. The decision of whether or not to “come out,” or to share an identity outside of the heteronormative imperative with someone, can be based on many issues such as safety and comfort (ALGBTIC LGBQQIA Competencies Taskforce, 2013).

Coleman’s (1982) model of coming out, based primarily on behavior without explicit consideration of context, describes five stages: Pre-coming Out, Coming Out, Exploration, First Relationships, and Integration. Pre-coming out is described as a stage where an individual is not conscious of non-heterosexual feelings, but may suffer from associated low self-esteem, depression, or behavioral problems. The “Coming Out” stage is the point at which individuals acknowledge their non-heterosexual feelings, and subsequently share this information with others. Since this is the start of self-acceptance, the response of the confidant(s) can have a significant impact on the individual’s self-esteem, internalized prejudice, acceptance of sexual feelings, and ability to share with others in the future. The third stage, Exploration, is the stage at which an individual

experiments with, or explores, their sexual identity. Coleman (1982) suggested that individuals may find this stage, likened to a heterosexual adolescent's first sexual experience, to be confusing because it often occurs after the adolescent years, when an individual is otherwise mature. Stage four, the First Relationships stage, comes after an individual has explored their identity and has developed a need for intimacy found in a committed relationship. This stage is characterized as a time when an individual is learning how to have a non-heterosexual relationship in a society that is predominantly heterosexual. First relationships are often intense and characterized by a lack of trust and level of possessiveness. Integration, the fifth and final stage of coming out, describes the on-going task of amalgamating an individual's sexual identity into their everyday life. Coleman (1982) suggested that achieving integration can take between 10 and 14 years beyond the initial awareness of non-heterosexual feelings.

Coleman (1982) identifies developmental tasks associated with each stage, suggesting that an individual must resolve certain issues prior to fully developing a non-heterosexual identity. Additionally, the importance of positive reactions from significant individuals in one's life is emphasized. While society will play a part in the development of an individual's identity, and how they choose to express it, the reaction received from significant parties such as parents, siblings, or close friends will greatly influence the coming out process (Coleman, 1982). With this, Coleman (1982) scratches the surface of discussing context as it relates to the influences of society and family on sexual identity, but focuses the reference on specific relationships and third-party feedback, as opposed to

influences based on specific identities and/or roles of an individual within society or their family, and does not account for individual resilience and/or values.

While this model references the process of “coming out,” Coleman’s (1982) stages approximate a model of *identity development*, as opposed to a model of “coming out” as it is currently understood. Coleman’s stages suggest that the act of sharing an individual’s identity with others takes place toward the beginning of development, prior to exploring their identity or engaging in non-heterosexual relationships. More recent models of development (e.g., D’Augelli, 1994a; McCarn & Fassinger, 1996; Mohr & Kendra, 2011; Weinberg, Williams, & Pryor, 1994) suggest that this is not necessarily the case. Additionally, as with Cass’s (1979) model, Coleman’s (1982) stages do not address the influence of sociocultural factors, outside of the reactions of friends and family to the disclosure of a non-heterosexual identity. While the coming out process for non-heterosexual individuals is critical to development, the current research places value on the interaction of an individual’s environment with their identity development. However, Coleman’s model offers important discussion around coming out, associated developmental tasks, and contributes to the literature working to normalize the experience.

Milton and MacDonald’s (1984) Theory of Homosexual Identity Formation

Milton and MacDonald’s (1984) theory of homosexual identity formation is a stage theory based on cognitive development. The theory purports that a homosexual identity emerges through a four-stage process. An individual begins in Symbiosis, where society dictates their identity. The individual then proceeds to the Egocentric stage, where

their homosexual feelings are addressed only as they directly pertain to themselves, not interpreting them in the context of the outside world. The Sociocentric stage is characterized by an individual exploring their potential homosexual identity based on society at large, considering cultural norms and conventions. Finally, individuals in the Universalistic stage critically interpret their identity, moving toward a sustained positive perspective of their homosexual identity.

This theory offers a unique approach to identity development, through a lens of cognitive development. The first stage of Milton and MacDonald's (1984) theory is particularly relevant to the current research, as it discusses the power of society to dictate an individual's identity. Furthermore, stages two and three offer context for how an individual processes their internal identity and, subsequently, makes sense of it and assigns a label for the outside world. As with the models presented by both Cass (1979) and Coleman (1982), this theory is limited to *homosexual* identity formation, restricting its application and validity across various populations within the LGBTQ community. The model only addresses context with broad strokes, conveying assumptions related to where an individual's development begins and ends and how society interacts with it along the way. It does not account for the potential affirming experiences or environments that an individual has been exposed to, or the influence of their other identities and associated values. This theory, and others developed during this time, has limited applicability based on an inherent bias in its composition – a bias suggesting that a homosexual identity is a deviant identity.

Troiden's (1988b) Model for Homosexual Identity Development

Troiden's (1988b) model for homosexual identity development describes a general, non-linear model of sexual identity development as it relates to men and women who identify as homosexual. The model is based on the ideal-typical homosexual individual, acknowledging that the ideal-type does not exist and is for benchmark purposes only. Troiden's (1988b) model consists of four stages: sensitization, identity confusion, identity assumption, and commitment.

Sensitization generally takes place before the onset of puberty. An individual will experience a general feeling of marginalization based on a perceived, but unidentified difference between self and peers of the same gender. The perceived feeling of being marginalized often leads to an experience of being excluded from peers. However, sexuality is not always related to a feeling of difference at this life stage.

Identity Confusion usually takes place in late adolescence, with an average age of 18 for females and 17 for males. During this time, an individual will experience same-sex arousal and a lack of opposite sex arousal. Reflection takes place regarding whether or not these feelings or behaviors may be homosexual in nature. These feelings and reflection lead to dissonance from an individual's previously held self-image. Anxiety, guilt, secrecy and isolation are often associated with this stage. These negative emotions, along with stereotypes and a lack of role models, may stifle the labeling process.

The third stage, Identity Assumption, takes place in early adulthood, between the ages of 21 and 23 for females and 19 and 21 for males (Troiden, 1988b). An individual assumes and accepts a label, or identity, as homosexual and shares their identity with

others. Immersion into the homosexual subculture takes place, and an individual begins to associate with other members of the LGBTQ community, reducing the social isolation that was present during previous stages. Sexual experimentation often takes place during this stage as well.

The fourth and final stage, Commitment, signifies the acceptance of a homosexual identity as a way of life, as opposed to a category of sexual expression or behavior. An individual in this stage will integrate sexual and emotional feelings, engaging in same-sex romantic and sexual relationships. With successful completion of this stage, an individual will engage in disclosure of their homosexual identity to individuals outside of the homosexual community they find appropriate and safe, and find both satisfaction and happiness in their identity.

While Troiden's (1988b) model offers a rich description of the experience of homosexual identity development, it is limited by its specificity, designating specific age ranges for each stage. This carries an assumption that each individual has a similar experience, and does not account for the influence of an individual's context on the development of their sexual identity, and how context may accelerate, delay, or even completely alter the trajectory of their identity. More recent literature (Diamond, 2005; Wong et al., 2015) suggests that identity development is fluid and can take place throughout the lifespan. However, Troiden's model is one of the first to acknowledge a perception of marginalization as integral to the developmental process, suggesting that identity development is influenced by sociocultural factors. The current study, framed by intersectionality, will place emphasis on the impact of marginalization as a direct result of

the power and privilege connected to an individual's identity or intersection of identities (Parent et al., 2013; Shields, 2008).

Weinberg, Williams, and Pryor's (1994) Model of Bisexual Identity Development

In addition to models of homosexual identity development, Weinberg, Williams, and Pryor's (1994) model of Bisexual Identity Development describes the experience of developing and labeling a non-heterosexual identity. This model identifies four stages. The primary stages include Initial Confusion, Finding and Applying the Label, and Settling into the Identity. The fourth possible stage is Continued Uncertainty. These four stages can be described as a similar process to the aforementioned models of non-heterosexual identity development, with slight variation unique to the bisexual identity, especially in the fourth stage.

During the Initial Confusion stage, individuals can experience fear or disorientation related to their attraction to both men and women. Confusion also stems from the perceived norm of monosexuality, or the expectation that individuals should only be attracted to either men or women. The unsettling feelings associated with this stage often lead to individuals exploring and experimenting with labels or categories that may describe their experience of attraction.

The second stage, Finding and Applying the Label, is categorized by the desire to identify and assign a label to their non-monosexual orientation. Individuals may find themselves in this stage based on experiencing sexual intimacy with both men and women, which can be seen as justifying the need for such a label. Alternatively, it may be based on simply accepting their attractions for what they are, and turning away from the

assumption of monosexuality. Social and familial support facilitates this process (Weinberg et al., 1994).

The next stage, Settling into the Identity, completes the process of assigning a label, *bisexual*, to one's sexual identity. During this stage, an individual's self-acceptance increases, while their concern with others' perception of their identity decreases. Growth at this stage of development can be attributed to external support and validation of both the adopted label and the overall existence of non-monosexual sexual orientations (Balsam & Mohr, 2007; Dolan, 2013; Horowitz & Newcomb, 1999; Weinberg et al., 1994).

Weinberg et al. (1994) described the final stage as Continued Uncertainty, as opposed to the typical final stage of synthesis, or some variation thereof (Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1982; D'Augelli, 1994a; Troiden, 1988b). The terminal stage of continued uncertainty that is experienced by bisexual individuals is due to the implicit monosexism both internally and in society. Individuals in this stage may continue to doubt their attractions and identity, questioning whether their non-monosexual label is simply a transition toward a hetero- or homo-sexual identity (Dolan, 2013; Weinberg et al., 1994).

This model's focus on norms and an emphasis on the label itself does not account for an individual's context, understanding of sexuality, or values related to their identities. However, Weinberg et al.'s (1994) model is significant in that it begins to validate the existence of non-monosexual identities within the academic literature. Though this model focuses on bisexual identity, this is a first step toward acknowledging the existence of more than the binary understanding of sexual identity that existed in the

literature up to this point (Weinberg et al., 1994). Literature surrounding the bisexual identity has developed over time, suggesting that a bisexual identity may be transient for some individuals, offering permission to explore a non-heterosexual identity or lifestyle before committing to a different label (Rosario et al., 2006). Others may find that a bisexual label accurately describes their experience, and will settle into the identity accordingly (Rowen & Malcolm, 2002). The acknowledgement and understanding of a variety of non-heterosexual identities is critical to the current research, offering a framework for conceptualizing the sexual identity and associated development of participants who identify as non-heterosexual.

McCarn and Fassinger's (1996) Model of Lesbian Identity Development

The Lesbian Identity Development Model (McCarn & Fassinger, 1996) conceptualizes lesbian identity development from both a personal and group perspective. The personal perspective addresses an individual's self-acceptance and internal awareness, while the group perspective addresses an individual's identity as it relates to their role in the LGBTQ community. Each perspective consists of four sequential phases, and an individual may progress through each perspective at a different rate.

The first phase, Awareness, describes an individual's awareness of being different, or a group awareness of varied sexual orientations in others. Phase two, Exploration, is categorized by an individual's exploration of same sex romantic/sexual feelings, or a group exploration of getting to know others in the gay/lesbian community. The Commitment or Deepening phase, phase three, consists of an individual's commitment to their sexuality, or a group understanding of consequences and/or

oppression related to their sexuality. The fourth and final phase, Internalization or Synthesis, involves an individual's synthesis of their sexuality into their whole identity, or a group synthesis of their identity as a member of a non-majority group and all that is associated with that group membership (McCarn & Fassinger, 1996).

Similar to Weinberg et al.'s (1994) model of Bisexual Identity Development, McCarn and Fassinger's (1996) model depicts the process of development of a non-heterosexual identity. However, this depiction is exclusive to the lesbian identity. While this perspective intends to account for the unique experience of women and how non-heterosexual identity development may be influenced by contextual gender differences, it suggests an evenness between the experiences of individuals who identify as "lesbian," and simultaneously excludes women who may not identify with this language. Although the model is somewhat short-sighted in its consideration of gender difference, it augments the aforementioned models of homosexual identity development by highlighting the process for lesbians or gay women, a population which is historically underrepresented within the relevant body of literature (Diamond & Savin-Williams, 2000; Morris & Rothblum, 1999; Rust, 1993; Sophie, 1986; Troiden, 1989). The inclusion of this model contributes to the foundation for the current research, offering an alternate conceptualization of identity development specific to lesbian women.

Critique of a Developmental Perspective of Sexual Identity as Related to the Study

Though the models that have been discussed are among the most widely accepted of their kind, many members of the academic community disagree with their account of the process. Primarily, literature suggests that linear, hierarchical stage models are not

necessarily an accurate account of non-heterosexual identity development (Eliason, 1996; Rosario et al., 2008). Linear models struggle to fully address the diversity of the identity development process (Horowitz & Newcomb, 2002; Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1995), potentially alienating individuals whose experiences do not fit neatly into the prescribed hierarchy of the specific model. A consideration of context in an individual's identity and expression reminds us that each individual's experience is unique, suggesting that the restrictive nature of many developmental models would fall short of capturing the phenomenon.

Also, much of the sexual identity research has been normed on white, middle-class, non-heterosexual men (Reynolds & Hanjorgiris, 2000). With little research on non-heterosexual women (Diamond & Savin-Williams, 2000; Morris & Rothblum, 1999; Rust, 1993; Sophie, 1986; Troiden, 1989), combined with the body of literature regarding the influence of gender differences (Savin-Williams & Diamond, 2000) and other multiple minority statuses (Bohan, 1996; Fukuyama & Ferguson, 2000; Greene, 1997; Parks, Hughes, & Matthews, 2004; Rust, 1996; Smith, 1997), the applicability of traditional developmental models to individuals outside of the aforementioned norming population, and without consideration of contextual influences, is called into question. Additionally, Rust (2003) noted that most widely referenced models were developed in the 1970s or 1980s (Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1982; Milton & MacDonald, 1984; Troiden, 1988b), during a much less accepting time – not accounting for context (e.g., political, religious, cultural) that has evolved throughout the past several decades.

Furthermore, it is important to highlight the fact that many models regarding sexual identity development suggest that an individual's sexual identity will stabilize over time (e.g., Cass, 1979). However, research indicates that the process of sexual identity development is ongoing over the course of the lifespan (Reynolds & Hanjorgiris, 2000). This is particularly true for women, who have been found to be more fluid in their sexual identity throughout the lifespan than their male counterparts (Diamond, 2005; Rust, 2003). This suggested fluidity implies that women's sense and expression of their sexual identity can change as they age. As discussed in Chapter One, women in early adulthood, such as the participants in the study, have started to develop a secure *understanding* of their identity (Erikson, 1968; Levinson, 1978; Schaie & Willis, 2000), regardless of its fluidity. This positions them to provide information on this phenomenon during a time in their lives when they may be beginning to understand their identity more clearly.

A strictly developmental approach, as presented by many of the aforementioned models, negates the significance of context as it relates to an individual's expression. These models, though primarily through omission, suggest that sexual identity and the associated language run parallel to one another. It is critical to not only separate the development or construction of a sexual identity from the labeling process, but to articulate the contextual, socio-cultural nature of a label and its significance related to an individual's experience. This can begin by identifying the influence of context on the expression of sexual identity, and how existing literature contributes to this perspective.

Contextual Perspectives of Sexual Identity

The existing literature related to sexual identity is satiated with developmental content, yet research indicates that additional influences related to sexual identity may include biology, sociocultural influences, gender roles, and sexual orientation as it relates to sexual development (Burri et al., 2011; Edwards & Brooks, 1999; Felson, 2011). The range of an individual's sexual orientation (the degree of flexibility in their sexual expression), as well as the location of that range on the continuum of sexual orientation (e.g., primarily heterosexual versus primarily homosexual) is determined by these same environmental, societal, and genetic factors (Epstein et al., 2012; Hayes & Hagedorn, 2001). This suggests that a perspective of sexual identity, particularly related to its expression, which does not account for contextual influences and differences is somewhat superficial, and largely incomplete. This information introduces a more evolved, contextual perspective of sexual identity than had been previously articulated through developmental models.

A contextual perspective of sexual identity is significant not only in its contribution to conceptualizing the construct in question, but also in understanding and identifying the gap in the literature. While limited research related to labeling can be found within the body of sexual identity literature, much of the research contributing to a multidimensional understanding of the labeling process is contextual and cross-disciplinary in nature, not formally connected to sexual identity. The formal sexual identity literature largely falls short when it comes to actively conceptualizing an individual's expression of their identity. The process of selecting a label for sexual

identity can only be understood by piecing literature together to connect the previous understanding of sexual identity to the modern understanding of human nature.

Contextual Influences

The literature cites a variety of contextual influences on sexual identity. Prominently, the family system plays a significant role in self-identification. Sexuality specific parental response and social support are closely associated with self-identification. Fueled by the notion that an individual's sense of personal identity is built through relationships with others and their environment (Bregman et al., 2013), the family system is not the only prominent influence on this construct.

Troiden (1988b) suggested a number of additional related influences. These included positive interactions with non-heterosexual individuals, access to an LGBTQ community, age, gender expression, nature of sexual experiences in high school, level of education, and the presence of affirming family, friends, and the workplace. Floyd and Stein (2002) highlighted the importance of the initial same-sex sexual experience and describe it as being "a revelation, an awakening, or a confirmation of sexual identity" (p. 169).

The importance of contact with the LGBTQ community is highlighted throughout the research (e.g., Floyd & Stein, 2002; Troiden, 1988b). As such, it seems that access to an LGBTQ community cannot be understated. Involvement in an LGB social network provides individuals with the opportunity to understand themselves in the context of the community, compared to others who also identify outside of the heteronormative context,

and to gain a concrete understanding of what it means to identify as lesbian, gay or bisexual.

One of the more notable differences in western society over the years is the increase of LGBTQ and sexually diverse role models in popular culture. For example, Ellen Degeneres was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom in November 2016 for the courage displayed by coming out in a public forum in the 1990s, citing her actions as helping to “change the hearts and minds of millions of Americans, accelerating our nation’s constant drive towards equality and acceptance for all” (NBCnews.com, 2016). Additional defining media presence includes personalities and artists such as Neil Patrick Harris, Sarah Paulson, and Anderson Cooper, as well as television programs and movies such as *The Fosters*, *Glee*, *Orange is the New Black*, *The Normal Heart*, and *Carol*. The availability and recognition of positive, successful, “out and proud” members of this community have proved to influence the construction of sexual identity and its expression, especially for youth and those who do not have access to LGBTQ social communities (Gomillion & Giuliano, 2011). An LGBTQ media presence helps to familiarize youth with a variety of identities, and to normalize not only the identities and orientations themselves, but the process of development and “coming out” to family, friends, and society as a whole (Floyd & Stein, 2002; Hayes & Hagedorn, 2001).

D’Augelli’s (1994a) Homosexual Lifespan Development Model

D’Augelli (1994a) offered a model of homosexual identity development from a lifespan perspective. This model, though developed over twenty years ago, comes relatively close to our current understanding of sexual identity. It also marks a shift in the

literature from a solely developmental perspective, toward a multidimensional perspective. The model posits that identity is a social construct, influenced by social situations as well as both biological and environmental changes (D'Augelli, 1994a). Consisting of six processes, as opposed to stages, the model offers a non-sequential, fluid perspective of sexual identity development.

The first process, Exiting a Heterosexual Identity, is the process of understanding that one's sexual orientation is outside of society's 'normal,' that one is not heterosexual, and sharing this information with others. Second, Developing a Personal LGB Identity, consists of internally self-identifying as lesbian, gay, or bisexual. Subsequently, this second process includes exploring what this new identity means, and developing an understanding of this new identity over time and through experience. D'Augelli (1994a) suggests that contact with other individuals who similarly identify is required in order to validate one's sexual orientation, and constructs defined by the gay, lesbian, or bisexual community dictate how to be a member of that community. Developing a LGB Social Identity, the third process, is the action of coming out to a friend or friends, and subsequently forming a network of supportive individuals who are aware of and accept one's LGB identity. The acquisition of a positive network would affirm one's LGB identity, while a negative network would influence an individual to hide or suppress their identity. This process is followed by Claiming an Identity as a LGB Offspring, process four. This includes disclosing one's LGB identity to parents or guardians (D'Augelli, 1994a). Coming out to parents can be the most challenging disclosure for members of the LGB community (Evans & D'Augelli, 1995). Lack of family support can cause

significant problems with development (D'Augelli, 1996). The fifth process, Developing a LGB Intimacy Status, is described as developing intimacy and forming relationships with individuals of the same sex. This can be difficult depending on the level of visibility of members of the LGB community within the larger community. Finally, Entering a LGB Community, the sixth and final process, is a general understanding of being 'out' across different areas in one's life, and openly engaging with the LGB community (i.e. events, clubs, bars, organizations; D'Augelli, 1994a).

D'Augelli (2012) has since added that a developmental perspective of sexual orientation is providing a multigenerational, multidimensional view of the construct. Additionally, the lack of a multidimensional view, or considering sexual orientation outside of an individuals' social, historical, and family context, is misrepresenting the concept (D'Augelli, 1994b; D'Augelli, 2012). Finally, it is important to acknowledge that this model indicates that individuals have the power to influence their own development by exercising control over their environment (D'Augelli, 1994a, 1994b).

D'Augelli's (1994a) original model was the first widely accepted model to acknowledge the intersection of social, biological, and environmental factors on the development of an individual's sexual identity. With the addition (D'Augelli, 2012) to the original model, citing a multigenerational and multidimensional component, this perspective offers a holistic view of sexual identity. This conceptualization contributes to the current study's approach to data collection, to be discussed in Chapter Three, highlighting specific constructs potentially related to identity development. These

constructs and associated processes help to frame interview questions as well as inform the process of data analysis.

Mohr and Kendra's (2011) Revision and Extension of a Multidimensional Measure of Sexual Minority Identity

Although previous models describe identity development as progressing through stages (Cass, 1979; Troiden, 1988b), the literature suggests that identity development may be best conceptualized as a non-linear, multidimensional process. Mohr and Kendra (2011) revised Mohr and Fassinger's (2000) multidimensional model of identity development in order to deconstruct identity development into six modern dimensions, as described by Bregman et al. (2013):

1. Internalized homonegativity (rejection of one's LGB identity)
2. Concealment motivation (concern with and motivation to protect one's privacy as an LGB person)
3. Acceptance concerns (concern with the potential for stigmatization as an LGB person)
4. Identity uncertainty (uncertainty about one's sexual orientation identity)
5. Identity superiority (view favoring LGB people over heterosexual people)
6. Finding the experience of developing an LGB identity to be a difficult process. (p. 418)

These dimensions offer a holistic view of sexual identity, accounting for a variety of pathways and elements that *may* combine to result in an individual's particular identity development experience. This perspective of sexual identity is the most modern of those

described in this section and is most applicable to the current research. While this model does not directly address the phenomenon of the labeling process itself, the six aforementioned dimensions describe categories that will assist in framing experiences and responses of participants.

Self-Identification, Labeling, and Categorization

The concept of labeling can be described as assigning a classification to someone or something based on a designated characteristic or set of characteristics (Labeling, 2016). The process of classifying groups of individuals with similar characteristics can serve as a method of discriminating individuals with a particular label from others in society (Gold & Richards, 2012). It can also carry meaning for an individual at many different levels (Diamond, 2005). Self-identification, labels, and categories are complex in nature and their implications should not be assumed.

Labeling Theory (Becker, 1963) laid a foundation for our understanding of the influence and process of labeling. This theory suggested that a label can influence not only the perception of society, but the individual who is labeled as well. When society identifies a behavior or set of behaviors as non-normative, any individual demonstrating said behavior(s) is identified as deviant. Becker (1963) asserted that once an individual's behavior is labeled as deviant, the original behavior is reinforced, and the individual's self-image aligns with the assigned label. This theory would suggest that a woman who has had a sexual relationship with another woman would be labeled, by society, as a lesbian. The self-fulfilling prophecy described by Labeling Theory would influence the woman to identify with the label "lesbian," regardless of its accuracy or significance to

the individual, and supporting the notion that a label may be selected based on many different influences. While it is important to understand Labeling Theory as developed based on context within the United States, the theory assists in the understanding of how an individual's behavior may be influenced by a sexual identity label that they may adopt or are assigned.

However, as the body of literature has grown, and society has progressed, the perception of labeling has broadened. Primarily, it is important to acknowledge the existence of innumerable labels used in modern culture. As previously discussed, commonly used labels include, but are not limited to heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, and questioning (ALGBTIC LGBQQIA Competencies Taskforce, 2013). The LGBTQ community adopts new labels on a regular basis. However, the definitions of these labels, or categories, tend to suggest that sexual identity/orientation, preference, and behavior are consistent and/or aligned. Research (e.g., Blumstein & Schwartz, 1989; Igartua et al., 2009; Laumann, 1994; Rust, 1992) indicates that this is not the case.

Both the public and mental health professionals are frequently misled in their conclusions regarding commonly used labels because people often do not neatly fit into the associated parameters (e.g., Blumstein & Schwartz, 1989; Igartua et al., 2009; Laumann, 1994; Rust, 1992). Research has questioned the usefulness of labeling due to growing evidence suggesting that sexuality is non-restrictive in nature, and that there is a general fluidity or flexibility between sexual identities throughout life (Diamond, 2005; Epstein et al., 2012). In order to meet the needs of this population, research may benefit from a focus on a broad range of categorization, in conjunction with an understanding of

the limitations of categorization, in order to adequately capture the experience (Diamond, 2005).

A discrepancy exists between the often over-simplified labels that individuals use to identify themselves and the reality of their behavior, fantasies, and attractions (Epstein et al., 2012). A study conducted by Vrangalova and Savin-Williams (2010) found that the majority of heterosexually self-identified participants identified a minimum of one characteristic (behavior, fantasies, or attraction) that was not congruent with the heterosexual label. For example, a man who self-identified as heterosexual may engage in sexual activity with men and women, but only engage in romantic relationships with women. This data is reminiscent of the general inadequacies of the commonly used labels. It also confirms that a degree of flexibility exists in an individual's expression of their sexual identity (Epstein et al., 2012).

Non-heterosexual identities are becoming more visible in and accepted by contemporary society. The view of alternate identities as valid and stable increases the likelihood of individuals identifying with a non-heterosexual label at a younger age (Rust, 2000). Additionally, though intimate relationships may contribute to the identity development process, Calzo and colleagues (2011) note that the average age of self-identification as lesbian, gay, or bisexual is younger than the age of the first non-heterosexual sexual or intimate experience, highlighting the development of self-perception as it exists outside of an intimate relationship.

The labels that have been discussed thus far carry certain assumptions in our culture. These assumptions make it difficult for individuals to adopt a stable sexual

identity unless they exhibit consistent attractions to members of a specific gender (Diamond, 2005). However, research (e.g., Chen-Hayes, 1997; Zinik, 1985) shows that more people display behavior that could be categorized as bisexual than homosexual. Inconsistent attractions, combined with the perceived lack of a stable identity, can result in a varied self-identification depending on the context or timeframe (Diamond, 2005).

Korchmaros and colleagues (2013) found that between 10% and 22% of individuals studied could not be categorized as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or heterosexual based on a single-indicator measure of sexual orientation. In fact, the individual's "label" would vary depending on the single-indicator that is used: sexual orientation, sexual behavior, or sexual preference. Furthermore, an individual's self-identity is frequently inconsistent with his or her fantasies, behavior, and/or preferences (Korchmaros et al., 2013; Rosario et al., 2006).

Regardless of an individual's affectional or sexual preferences, self-identifying as non-heterosexual could potentially influence an individual to engage in congruent behavior (Rosario et al., 2006). This concept further complicates the task of selecting a label due to an individual's desire to behave congruently with the perception of their family, friends, and society. The aforementioned phenomenon has the potential to misrepresent the data when assessed using either single-indicator (assessing sexual identity based on one characteristic only) or multiple-indicator measures (assessing sexual identity based on many characteristics).

Depending on the perspective and the factors considered, individuals without stable identities, or with *fluid* identities, could appear to be heterosexual, they could

appear to be homosexual, or they could appear to be a variation of the two ends of the spectrum. Diamond (2005) discusses the notion that self-identification often carries meaning for the individual but is not necessarily indicative of the experience or status of their sexual identity development. Essentially, individuals may select a particular label for any number of reasons. As such, the implications of that label should not be assumed, but focus should be placed on the meaning of self-identification for the individual. This helps to illustrate the overall insufficiency of the commonly used “lesbian,” “gay,” and “bisexual” labels and urges professionals to consider where, if at all, and how it is appropriate to use labels when working with this population. Floyd and Stein (2002) suggest that individuals would benefit from categorization based on experiences and individual qualities as opposed to the socially constructed labels of homosexual, heterosexual, and bisexual.

The small cross-section of labels discussed in this document and the foundational knowledge of the process of self-identification help to bring the issue addressed by this study into focus. Many individuals may struggle with understanding the difference between identifying with one label over another, as many of the aforementioned labels have similar academic definitions, or inconsistent definitions within each of the individual communities (Brown, 2002; Diamond, 2008). For example, why would a woman identify as “homosexual,” but have no connection to and no desire to associate with a label of “lesbian”? How did this woman select her label? What does it mean to her? The process of self-labeling is complex and different for each individual, and it is critical to consider all associated influences when drawing conclusions.

Queer Theory

The term “queer” can have many different meanings depending on its context. Queer can be an identity, theoretical orientation, anything beyond the normative, or a theory (Halperin, 1995). Queer Theory posits a social, as opposed to a critical, constructivist paradigm. It postulates that based on the fluid and diverse nature of both gender and sexual identities in society, and associated behaviors across the lifespan, individuals cannot be accurately categorized by binaries (Butler, 1990). Queer Theory destabilizes the assumption that “normal” exists. This notion suggests that perfection, or the normative, cannot be attained, so everyone is “queer” (Warner, 2004).

The true meaning of queer must be understood in order to separate the concepts of queer theory and the queering of society from the degrading, historical use of the term (Halperin, 1995; Warner, 2004). A queer identity is that of a positionality compared to the normative. This positionality is not limited to gay men and lesbians, but applicable to anyone who experiences or perceives the experience of marginalization based on their identity, presentation, or preferences (Halperin, 1995; Warner, 2004). A queer identity does not encourage individuals to fit in or find a way to fit in, but encourages individuals, instead, to find pride in the queer identity and resist the urge to fit in, shifting any issue from the queer individual onto society itself. Warner (2004) suggests that a non-queer identity requires effort. The maintenance of a non-queer identity requires an understanding and adherence to an expectation, and renouncing parts of your identity that may not “fit.”

Heteronormativity is critiqued by Queer Theory, suggesting that traditional gender roles/identities and sexual orientations/identities are socially constructed, thus vulnerable to questioning and reconstruction (Butler, 1990), and heterosexuality should not be perceived as the standard in our society (Oswald, Blume, & Marks, 2005). The general idea of an identity is an illusion which is based on a perceived consistency in behavior which is said to dictate future behavior (Butler, 1990). Not only does society find comfort in the predictability of categorization, but socially constructed categories contribute to society's ability to apply privilege and social control.

By focusing inquiry on identity labels and categories, researchers are jeopardizing an understanding of sexuality as fluid and liberated. Queer theorists ask how the commonly understood labels and categories of sexual orientation came to control individuals' understanding of themselves and others. They ask how boundaries for categories are established, how categories influence life, and if it is possible to pursue a more liberated, boundary-free existence (Warner, 2004). Sedgwick (1992) states that an identity is comprised of too many components to label it based on a single characteristic, such as the gender of the person to whom an individual is sexually or affectionally attracted.

The notion of identity has been challenged from various perspectives. Individuals engage in varied levels of performativity in order to establish and sustain their identity. The performances that an individual engages in could be a reflection of who they truly are, or a reflection of what is expected of them and their identity from society (Sedgwick,

2003). However, whether an individual's identity is self-selected or defined by society, it tends to resist change (Tindall & Waters, 2012).

Queer research offers a broad range of terminology, labels, and categories for identity. This range includes terms such as sexual minority, homosexual, queer, MSM (men who have sex with men), fairy, and gay. The wide variety of terms exists because none of the terms has a clear, universally accepted definition. Most, if not all of these terms, can mean different things, and can be used to offend or empower, depending on the context (De Saussure, 2011). To avoid confusion, and to set an example for understanding identities in true life, terminology in queer research should be understood in the context provided by that researcher or individual (Warner, 2004).

Researchers have critiqued Queer Theory from a number of perspectives. First, queer, as a term, offers solidarity for individuals within the LGBTQ community, but it is an identity without characteristics (Halperin, 1995). Essentially, the only information provided by an identity of *queer* is that an individual identifies outside of the heteronormative imperative. Additionally, a queer identity lacks the essence of identity, as we understand it, and fails to express the lived experience of the individual (Nagoshi & Brzuzy, 2010; Sullivan, 2003). It is also argued that Queer Theory disregards the individual's institutional contexts and social locations (Green, 2002), and innately over-emphasizes sexual identities as opposed to advocating for an intersectional perspective of identity (Cohen, 1997).

While Queer Theory provides a foundation for the current understanding of queer research, and an ideal direction for understanding identity overall, it does not explain why

an individual selects their label. This research, with a focus on the *process* of self-identifying with a label, as opposed to the *label itself*, will contribute to queer research. Possible contributions include highlighting the reality of a label's function for an individual or shedding light on why an individual's label may not be reflective of their lived experience, as well as contributing to an explicit connection between queer research and intersectionality.

Intersectionality

As discussed in Chapter One, the concept of intersectionality was used as the theoretical framework from which the study was approached. Intersectionality began to be articulated as a theoretical framework in the early 1990s (Crenshaw, 1991; Few-Demo, 2014). Recent inquiry has continued the discussion, leading researchers to not only discuss intersectionality as a potential framework, but to emphasize the importance of intersectionality in *all* research (Few-Demo, 2014; McCall, 2005; Shields, 2008). Crenshaw (1989) suggested that analysis without consideration of intersectionality may not fully represent an individual's experience. This perspective has been touted as a sophisticated representation of social inequality, reaching beyond disaggregated identities toward understanding that inequality cannot be addressed without understanding identities in context of one another (Collins & Bilge, 2016).

The understanding of intersectionality has grown in recent years. Since the term was first coined in 1989 (Crenshaw, 1989), the notion of intersectionality has been used in various contexts (Crenshaw, 1991; Few-Demo, 2014; Few-Demo et al., 2016; Greenwood, 2008; Shields, 2008), highlighting the breadth of its application. However,

Sears (2012) discussed a comprehensive perspective of intersectionality as a framework to improve cultural competence in education. Murray, Pope, and Willis (2016) clearly explain the tenets presented by Sears (2012) as:

First, the intersectional approach holds that each person encompasses multiple statuses based on contextual variables. Second, some or all of these statuses may carry advantages and disadvantages. Third, each person's various statuses interact with one another. Fourth, the influence of each status cannot be considered without consideration of the other statuses. Fifth, over time, each status's influence may change based on individual or societal changes. Sixth, above all, each individual is a unique person. Seventh, professionals must be mindful of their own biases and assumptions, regardless of whether they share or do not share statuses with the clients they serve. Finally, professionals should be mindful of the intersectional statuses that they themselves possess. (pp. 249-250)

With these tenets in mind, the researcher must be cognizant of intersections of and discord between identities and statuses within the individual and as they are situated in the larger sociopolitical context (Few-Demo, 2014).

Building on the basic tenets of intersectionality, as described above, it is critical to articulate the role of power in an intersectional approach, and, more specifically, how interacting social locations create an entirely new social location that cannot be accounted for by any individual identity on its own. The relative power, or advantages and/or disadvantages, that an identity carries must be taken into consideration collectively. "The events and conditions of social and political life and the self can seldom be understood as

shaped by one factor” (Collins & Bilge, 2016, p. 2). For example, the experience of compounded oppression for individuals with multiple minority identities must be approached as distinct from the oppression that they may experience based on one identity and the oppression that they experience based on another identity. The notion of “intersectional disempowerment,” offered by Crenshaw (1991, p. 1252), highlights the impact that mutually exclusive, multiple minority identities may have on an individual, not only compounding their experience with oppression from multiple directions, but requiring an individual to divide their energies between identities and associated agendas.

An intersectional approach allows an individual to be viewed not just as a sum of their parts. On the contrary, it advances the understanding of an individual as a complex integration of metaphorical joints and gears that are interdependent on one another. It is critical to maintain an intersectional perspective of the study because an individual’s statuses and intersections are the experiences that build their identity and how they choose to express their identity. Specifically, the lens through which an individual has experienced life will contribute to how they label their sexual identity. Each participant in the population for this study, non-heterosexual women in early adulthood, carries a minimum of two minority statuses (i.e. non-heterosexual and woman) without knowing any additional information. An intersectional framework will help to conceptualize the experience of each participant. It will help to articulate how each status, or component of the identity, and the associated power or privilege interacts with the individual’s sexual identity, how the combination of identities generates something new, and what this “new” thing is for each participant.

Intersectionality calls attention to the multiple experiences of the labeling process, and how an individual ultimately forms an identity. The use of intersectionality as a framework for this study will allow me to examine salient experiences and identities in participants' lives, and how these experiences or identities may relate to their current label for their sexual identity. An intersectional approach asserts that multiple social locations must be considered in order to truly understand an individual's experience (Kazyak, 2012; Murray et al., 2016; Nagel, 2000). This type of approach has been emphasized in recent years (McCall, 2005; Shields, 2008). Intersectionality values the relationship between an individual's multiple identities, evaluating this relationship based on privilege and power associated with each identity (Collins & Bilge, 2016; Parent et al., 2013; Shields, 2008). Addressing intersectionality allows an individual to be seen as a constellation of identities, influencing one another based on the associated privilege, essentially constructing an individual, piece by piece. Acknowledging that each identity carried by an individual pushes and pulls on their other identities in order to create the whole of the individual, with particular attention toward potentially conflicting identities, frames a more robust understanding of an individual's experience and expression.

Prominent Intersections

The concept of intersecting identities, or intersectionality, helps to establish a foundation for understanding how the influencing factors may interact with sexual identity. Intersectionality suggests that interlocking identities, understood in terms of their comparative sociocultural privilege, influence both identity development and individual experience (Parent et al., 2013; Sears, 2012; Shields, 2008). Existing literature

cites several identities that may have a significant relationship with sexual identity. These include religious (Gahan, 2012), cohort (McCormack, Anderson, & Adams, 2014), racial, and ethnic identities (Parent et al., 2013). While it is critical to consider *all* identities when using an intersectional framework, the research on these specific identities begins to articulate potential relationships between identities that may present conflict with an individual's non-heterosexual identity.

Religion. Research has shown that religious involvement and prejudice have a positive correlation (Hood, Hill, & Spilka, 2009). However, only a limited amount of literature regarding the relationship between the development of sexual identity and that of religious/spiritual identity has been generated during the 21st century (Buchanan, Dzelme, Harris, & Hecker, 2001; Felson, 2011; Hansen & Lambert, 2011; Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000; Schuck & Liddle, 2001; Sherry, Adelman, Whilde, & Quick, 2010; Whitley Jr., 2009). Some research (e.g., Sherry et al., 2010) indicated that non-heterosexual individuals with conservative religious/spiritual backgrounds experience guilt regarding their sexual minority status when working to reconcile their religious/spiritual identity. Additional inquiry suggests that non-heterosexual identities intensify both the quality and quantity of religious and/or spiritual struggles. This intensification is based on the perceived competition between their sexual and religious and/or spiritual identity (Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000; Sherry et al., 2010; Wood & Conley, 2014). However, other studies (Hansen & Lambert, 2011; Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000) show that perceived incongruence between religious/spiritual identity and sexual identity can cause sexual minorities to reassess their religious/spiritual

identity. While religious affiliation may impact sexual identity development, it is also important to consider the specific impact of a religion's role in an individual's life, including the implicit influence of religion through family or friends, as well as an individual's intrinsic and extrinsic religious orientations (Allport & Ross, 1967).

Formal religion carries perspectives on beliefs, behavior, and many other issues. Each religion, as well as each denomination and/or congregation within said religion, may carry its own perspective on sexual identity (Balkin, Watts, & Ali, 2014). It is important to acknowledge the various perspectives held by religious groups in order to understand the impact that membership to a particular religion may have on the selection of an individual's label.

Cohort effect. The presence of generational differences influences the sexual identity development of non-heterosexual individuals. Older cohorts tend to have a more negative experience related to their sexual identity, based in prejudiced and stereotypical behavior. Cohort differences may be attributed to decreased cultural homophobia (Baunach, 2012; Kozloski, 2010; McCormack et al., 2014), the normalization of non-heterosexual identities at an early age (Stotzer, 2009), or the changes in stereotypically gendered behaviors (Adams, 2011; Morris, McCormack, & Anderson, 2014). Research (Dimock, Doherty, & Kiley, 2013) indicates that 70% of individuals born in 1980 or later are in support of marriage equality, with 74% of this group holding the belief that homosexuality should be an accepted way of life. The *cohort effect* discussed here suggests that an individual's cohort, age, or generation, may have an effect on the label they select for their sexual identity.

Race, ethnicity, and multiple minority status. The presence of multiple minority identities may influence the selection of a label for various reasons. Perceptions of non-heterosexual orientations vary between and across ethnicities and cultures (Bohan, 1996; Fukuyama & Ferguson, 2000; Greene, 1997; Rust, 1996; Smith, 1997). In addition to negotiating expectations of a heterocentric society, non-heterosexual women of color must also negotiate norms and values of pertinent racial and/or ethnic groups. While religion and family are cited as sources of support within racial and ethnic minority groups (Fukuyama & Ferguson, 2000), these same groups have been known to carry anti-homosexual sentiment (Greene, 1997).

The power of family or religious ties can often prevent rejection of/for members of sexual minority groups with multiple minority statuses. However, tolerance of such an identity frequently comes in exchange for silence within the family or religious community (Bohan, 1996; Parks et al., 2004). Research suggests that racism within the LGBTQ community, combined with homophobia in ethnic and racial minority communities limit the integration and the disclosure of non-heterosexual identities among women of color (Greene, 1997; Morris, Waldo, & Rothblum, 2001). Risks of disclosing a non-heterosexual sexual identity are often greater for racial or ethnic minority women than for their racial/ethnic majority counterparts (Parks et al., 2004).

Literature has also indicated that certain minority identities may take precedence over others (Greene, 1997; Mays, Cochran, & Rhue, 1993; Parks et al., 2004). For example, a Latina woman, during the pilot study for the current research (to be discussed in Chapter Three), indicated that her family was more accepting of her label, bisexual,

because of her feminine gender expression. The value that various races or ethnicities place on qualities such as gender role or a traditional family may outweigh a non-heterosexual label, influencing an individual to more openly embrace such an identity as long as the qualities that are considered primary meet a cultural expectation.

Women of color may navigate disclosure and expression of their sexual identity based on the cultural expectation of discretion regarding sexual identity in ethnic and/or racial communities. This cultural expectation, or norm, may cause racial/ethnic minority women to exercise caution in adopting a non-heterosexual identity in order to circumvent family conflict. However, this cultural expectation may not impact women who are members of racial/ethnic majority groups, allowing for more freedom in expression and/or disclosure of their sexual identity. To the contrary, women of racial/ethnic minority groups may be better equipped to manage a minority identity (such as an LGBTQ identity) based on their experience navigating their racial/ethnic identity, grounding them in familial and community support, and providing a foundation on which to express themselves in the face of oppression from the social majority (Parks et al., 2004).

Furthermore, individuals with multiple minority statuses often have the skills to function within both their minority culture and the majority culture. Individuals of the dominant culture can be more poorly equipped to adjust to a minority status. While both racial/ethnic minority and majority LGBTQ individuals must work to integrate an LGBTQ identity into their overall identity, members of a racial/ethnic majority group may be better prepared to recognize an additional status that places them in a new minority group, having an understanding of the challenges that may follow this acknowledgement

(Parks et al., 2004). The aforementioned circumstances may indicate that an individual's race and/or ethnicity influences the adoption of one sexual identity label over another, regardless of their attractions or fantasies.

Diamond's (2005) View of Lesbian Subtypes

Diamond (2005) offered a perspective based on the assumption of fluidity in sexual identity over time. Fluidity is the flexibility to flow between and/or around identities or labels throughout life. The research identified three Lesbian Subtypes: stable lesbians, fluid lesbians, and stable nonlesbians. The subtypes were based on non-heterosexual women's identification over the course of eight years. Stable lesbians maintained a lesbian identity, fluid lesbians alternated between lesbian and nonlesbian identification, and nonlesbians never identified as lesbian during the study. While there is overlap between each subtype depending on the measure used (i.e. attractions, behaviors), these groups are distinct from one another. This research highlighted the inadequacy of the commonly used labels of lesbian and bisexual for women who adopt non-heterosexual identities. While these labels may have significance to the individual who chooses to identify as lesbian or bisexual, at any specific chronological point, the label does not necessarily dictate that the individual aligns herself with the textbook definition of the term, nor does it delineate the nature of an individual's past, present, or future sexual identity. Diamond (2005) indicated that society should, but does not, embrace a range of sexual minority identities, with the understanding that labels are artificial and do not necessarily represent a type or standard of behavior. Diamond (2005) discussed what labels do not mean or represent, but does not offer suggestions as

to what labels do represent or how they are selected. The study offers data to compliment Diamond's (2005) work, identifying the purpose or rationale for the selection of a particular label over another at a certain point in time.

Sexual Identity Construction for Women in Early Adulthood

The importance of an individual's identity has been discussed for decades. Erikson (1968) highlighted the qualities of a healthy identity as being significant, meaningful, and integrated within an individual, contextualized in society. Identity development can be viewed from a variety of perspectives. A foundational understanding of development is critical to place the selected population into context. The sample for this study, non-heterosexual women in early adulthood, from age 26 through 35 (Wong et al., 2015), are in a rich point in their identity construction process across a variety of dimensions. The processes related to age, gender, and sexuality are particularly important to conceptualizing the population for the research.

Early Adulthood

Various developmental models have addressed early adulthood throughout the years. As stated in Chapter One, a variety of models indicate that the early adulthood stage is characterized by the beginning development of a secure sense of identity, motivation to achieve intimacy, and sexual maturity (Erikson, 1968; Levinson, 1978; Schaie & Willis, 2000). Additionally, sexual orientation tends to stabilize during this stage (Diamond, 2003; Diamond & Wallen, 2011; Savin-Williams & Ream, 2007), and there is a focus on pursuing fulfilling social relationships (Carmichael et al., 2015).

Erikson's (1968) Stages of Psychosocial Development set a foundation for understanding this period of development. According to these stages, individuals face developmental tasks and challenges throughout the lifespan, and each life stage carries a different task. The young adult stage, from 19-40, is referred to as the Intimacy versus Isolation stage. It is during this time that individuals are tasked with the development of relationships with others, and face issues around sexual maturation, reciprocal love, and emotional connection. Additionally, Erikson's (1968) original model stresses the importance of gender roles and heterosexual relationships. While Erikson's (1968) model continues to be referenced today, it is important to understand this model in context, and acknowledge that Erikson and Erikson (1998) updated his theory to note that relationships during this stage may be with "partners in friendship, sex, competition, and cooperation" (p. 32), but still made no mention of non-heterosexual relationships. Given the social and scientific progress of the last 50 years, it is understood that Erikson's view of development can be seen as a framework, but is not applicable to all populations, particularly given the norming population did not include women. Models such as Erikson's (1968) served as the foundation for modern theories of development, but lacked the ability to be representative of all people. This void called for researchers to develop models for specific groups and populations, bringing the research to where it is today.

Jeffrey Arnett (2000) proposed a more modern understanding of development that overlaps with Erikson's (1968) Young Adulthood stage. Arnett (2000, 2004, 2007) identified the stage between the late teens and at least the mid to late twenties

(approximately ages 18 to 25) as Emerging Adulthood. This stage was developed and defined based on the notion that, in industrialized countries, this period of time in an individual's life which was once understood as a time of transition, has grown into a life stage of its own (Arnett, 2007). He identified five distinguishing characteristics of this stage, acknowledging that these characteristics are more prevalent during, but not unique to this life stage: *The Age of Identity Explorations*, *The Age of Instability*, *The Self-Focused Age*, *The Age of Feeling In-Between*, and *The Age of Possibilities*. These characteristics highlight the flexibility and personally focused nature of this developmental period. While the age ranges associated with Emerging Adulthood (Arnett, 2000, 2007) do not perfectly match the age ranges of the selected population for this study, the basis for his range considered median ages for marriage, and childbirth, and entering the workforce in the U.S., which have continued to rise (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016). This suggests that the characteristics for Emerging Adulthood may extend well beyond the late twenties, depending on the socio-cultural context. Arnett's (2000, 2004, 2007) conceptualization of Emerging Adulthood helps to understand the developmental perspective of the population for this study, framing the sample as primed to actively explore and discover their identities.

Women's Development

The modern understanding of women's development is based more on specific developmental processes rather than a full lifespan approach (Bader, 2009; Diamond, 2008; Gilligan, 1982; Peplau & Garnets, 2000). Prior to conceptualizing women's sexuality, it is important to understand women's development from a general perspective.

As a necessary identity for participants of this study, a firm understanding of a woman's experience and how she evolves is foundational.

Carol Gilligan's (1982) groundbreaking studies of women's identity development suggested that men's identities were defined by achievement and autonomy while women's identities tended to be associated with relationships and connections with others. She emphasized listening to women's voices directly in order to understand their meaning-making and identity formation processes. Gilligan's (1982) model of moral development consisted of three stages and two transitional phases.

Stage One: *Caring for Self for Individual Survival* is characterized by an orientation toward personal needs and desires. Individuals have a tendency to be isolated, and relationships tend to fall short of expectations during this stage.

First Transition: The transition from *selfishness to responsibility* highlights relationships with others. During this transition, independence and selfishness shifts to connection, responsibility, care, and a focus on "doing the right thing."

Stage Two: *"Good" is Care for Others* is characterized by the understanding of being "good" as engaging in self-sacrifice. Individuals in this stage reflect conventional values, putting their needs aside to tend to the people they care about.

Second Transition: The transition from *goodness to truth* is a shift in focusing on others before the self to a consideration of personal need in relation to responsibility to others.

Stage Three: *Interdependence* is characterized by a perspective of nonviolence as the primary focus of moral decision making. At this stage, the individual has an evolved sense of self, with a priority to not hurt others or themselves.

Gilligan's (1982) model informs this study's perspective of sexual identity construction and subsequent expression by contextualizing a woman's choices. Her stage of moral development has the potential to determine her priorities, influencing her to make choices to pursue a non-heterosexual lifestyle, to varying degrees, based on her own needs alone, the needs of others alone, or a balance between the two. This insight helps to understand a woman's tendency toward self-sacrifice, focusing her energy on the health and happiness of others, at the expense of meeting her own needs.

While research (Lips, 1997) has suggested that Gilligan's (1982) work has only reinforced gender stereotypes, Helms (1990) built upon this perspective of women to develop the Womanist Identity Model, presented by Ossana, Helms, and Leonard (1992). Helms proposed that women depart from socially constructed definitions of womanhood, and subsequently generate value, internal standards, and definitions of womanhood through a linear developmental process. This four-stage model moves from Pre-Encounter to Encounter, Immersion-Emersion, and then Internalization.

Stage One, Pre-Encounter, is characterized by a woman conforming to socially constructed perceptions regarding gender and maintaining a limited view of gender roles. Thoughts and behaviors during Stage One, dictated by the aforementioned perspectives, tend to devalue women, while esteeming men. During Stage Two, Encounter, a woman reacts to contact with information and/or experiences that broaden her understanding of

womanhood and ways of living by questioning previously accepted values and beliefs associated with the Pre-Encounter stage. Stage Three, Immersion-Emersion, begins with the “idealization of women, particularly those who expand the definition of womanhood, and active rejection of male-supremacist definitions of womanhood” (Ossana et al., 1992, p. 403). This is followed by a woman seeking out meaningful relationships with other women, and the development of a positive, self-affirming perspective of womanhood. Finally, Internalization, the fourth stage, is the incorporation of the newly found positive perspective of womanhood with the rest of a woman’s identity, and refusal to adhere to social expectations regarding womanhood.

Helms’s (1990) model is particularly applicable to the selected population. The Womanist Identity Model (Helms, 1990; Ossana et al., 1992) emphasized the importance of relationships as critical to the identity development of women. Without relationships with others, women’s identities would be based solely on societal expectations, rather than the establishment of a personal identity as a woman. The theory highlights the importance of role models and the power of women to establish their identity outside of sociocultural expectations. These features are a departure from the patriarchal, heteronormative gender roles of the past, and allow for meaningful development along a number of identity constructs (i.e. gender, gender expression, sexual identity). This model suggests a focus for identity-based research with women on acquiring the personal narrative regarding how relationships contributed to shaping women’s identities, which has informed the methodology for the current research.

Brown and Gilligan (1993) push this concept forward by articulating society's impact on a girl's, and ultimately a woman's, role in relationships. They cited three methods of dissociation associated with how girls come to exist in relationships:

1. Separating themselves or their psyches from their bodies so as not to know what they were feeling;
2. Disassociating their voice from their feelings and thoughts so that others would not know what they were experiencing;
3. Taking themselves out of relationship so that they could better approximate what others want and desire or some ideal image of what a woman or what a person should be (p. 30).

Society affirms these actions of women silencing themselves, of restricting their free speech.

The nature of women to find themselves in their identities as members of relationships, combined with reinforcement, from a young age, to put others before themselves while disregarding their thoughts and feelings, guides them throughout life. While the qualities rooted in these influences may prepare them to be caregivers, women are also prepared to be quiet. This basic understanding of a woman's psychological development informs the choices she makes throughout her life.

Sexual Identity Construction

Prior to identifying as non-heterosexual, individuals have often reached certain milestones or engaged in certain experiences. These experiences are not exclusive to the non-heterosexual community, but contribute to an individual's awareness of their

sexuality and prepare them to identify with a label. Milestones and experiences that often occur prior to identifying can include the development of self-esteem, self-awareness, sexual motivation, and a perception of personal sexuality (Calzo et al., 2011; Cass, 1979; Floyd & Stein, 2002; Hayes & Hagedorn, 2001; Rotheram-Borus & Langabeer, 2001; Sophie, 1986; Troiden, 1988b). Additional milestones may include awareness of same-sex attractions, engagement in sexual experimentation or first sexual experience, and immersion in, or at least contact with a non-heterosexual social network or community (Cass, 1979; Floyd & Stein, 2002; Hayes & Hagedorn, 2001; Rotheram-Borus & Langabeer, 2001; Sophie, 1986; Troiden, 1988b).

While identification can take place prior to these milestones, these experiences tend to have an affirming effect on an individual's identity. For example, a woman may self-identify as a lesbian based on her emotional connection with other women, prior to having a physical sexual experience with another woman. However, upon her first same-sex sexual experience, her identity as a lesbian may become much more crystallized, or she may believe that her lesbian identity does not actually fit with her experience, and then work to reassess her identity.

Additionally, building upon our understanding of women's development as it directly relates to her gender identity, it is important to articulate that women's sexuality is understood as being more flexible than men's sexuality while remaining within the social constructs surrounding sexuality (Bader, 2009; Diamond & Butterworth, 2008; Peplau & Garnets, 2000). Women also tend to exhibit a broader range of romantic and sexual attraction than men do, suggesting a general openness to sexual experience

(Peplau & Garnets, 2000). These qualities contribute to the construction of a sexual identity, as they inform the nature and freedom of the potential range of a woman's sexual identity.

An individual's choices will vary based on their perception of their environment. Though the culture in the United States is shifting and growing in understanding, as suggested by the growing non-heterosexual media presence and legislative attention to issues of equality, the experience of many individuals is that society has an anti-homosexual, stigma-laden outlook. This perception can negatively impact the construction of and/or commitment to a sexual identity by stifling the identity's growth and an individual's ability to adjust (Cass, 1979; McCarn & Fassinger, 1996; Ritter & Terndrup, 2002; Rosario et al., 2006; Rust, 2003; Troiden, 1988b).

Sexual identity construction is related to awareness of attraction, questioning the expectation of a heterosexual lifestyle, and exploration of a non-heterosexual identity and community. These three tenets have a symbiotic relationship with the developmental qualities of women in early adulthood. These qualities include the fluid nature of their sexuality (Bader, 2009; Diamond & Butterworth, 2008; Peplau & Garnets, 2000), ability to be open to sexual and romantic attraction across gender identities (Peplau & Garnets, 2000), and stable sexual identity (Diamond, 2003; Diamond & Wallen, 2011; Savin-Williams & Ream, 2007). They also tend to have a secure sense of their overall identity, desire to achieve intimacy and engage in relationships, and have reached sexual maturation (Erikson, 1968; Levinson, 1978; Schaie & Willis, 2000). Finally, women in early adulthood tend to be focused on both the quality and quantity of social relationships

(Carmichael et al., 2015), contributing to the exploration of non-heterosexual communities in order to establish a fulfilling social network.

While the idea of a healthy sexual identity is important, culture in the United States tends to pressure individuals to actively identify with a label for their sexual identity. The collective pressure to adopt the dominant, assumed heterosexual lifestyle and corresponding identity label can be detrimental to the expression of the possible alternatives (Edwards & Brooks, 1999; Epstein et al., 2012; Korchmaros et al., 2013; Morgan, 2011). As Western society has progressed, the visibility and understanding of non-heterosexual sexual identities have grown (Diamond, 2005). Much of the focus of past research on non-heterosexual individuals has been on the “coming out” process (Rosario et al., 2006). However, this process usually comes after one has constructed and committed to an identity. As previously discussed, the construction of one’s sexual identity involves awareness of attraction, questioning the expectation of a heterosexual lifestyle, and exploring an LGB identity through contact with the non-heterosexual community – socially, sexually, and/or romantically (Cass, 1979; Rosario et al., 2006; Troiden, 1988b). Through this process, an individual begins to become aware of their sexual attractions and synthesizes this awareness into a self-identity (Bregman et al., 2013; Mohr & Fassinger, 2000) and, subsequently, a label.

Toward a Multidimensional Understanding of Sexual Identity

The literature in recent years has been lending itself to a more widely accepted view of sexual identity development as nonlinear, ongoing, and multidimensional (Bregman et al., 2013; Epstein et al., 2012; Kinsey et al., 1948; Kinsey et al., 1953; Mohr

& Fassinger, 2000; Rosario et al., 2006). This multidimensional understanding of sexual identity is critical to breaking down boundaries for individuals whose experience(s) may not fit into the common societal or academic understanding of one identity or another – an experience that resonates with most of us. The aforementioned identifiers of homosexual, heterosexual or bisexual lack the ability to carry specificity in regard to experience or intention. These labels do not fully capture the varied experience of most individuals and are thus misleading for the individual themselves, as well as for family, friends, and professionals (Epstein et al., 2012; Korchmaros et al., 2013). Many researchers have begun to call for the use of a wider variety of categories (Korchmaros et al., 2013) or the discontinuation of the use of labels altogether (Diamond, 2005). While these calls to action highlight the need to reshape our perspective, a larger take-away is how the complexity of the human experience necessitates a departure from assumptions and expectations carried by our understanding of categories and labels.

The body of literature provides a foundation from which to approach the concept of sexual identity self-identification. While the literature provides substantive background on a number of associated influences, there is minimal research on how specific individuals choose to self-identify with one term as opposed to another, or at all. The study explored the individual experience of how non-heterosexual self-identified women in early adulthood describe the process for selecting the current label for their sexual identity.

Chapter Three: Methodology

The purpose of this study was to explore what influences an individual to adopt a specific label for their sexual identity. As previously discussed, the primary research question for this study was: *How do non-heterosexual women in early adulthood experience the process for selecting the current label for their sexual identity?* This chapter presents the study's design, sample selection, data collection, data analysis, pilot study, trustworthiness, researcher bias, and possible methodological issues.

For this study, I adopted a phenomenological qualitative approach based on portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1986; Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997). The data collection portion of the study consisted of the acquisition of demographic information, relevant artifacts selected by the participants, and three rounds of interviews with each of three participants. The data positioned me to acquire a rich description of each individual's experience of selecting a label for their sexual identity (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997), within the context of their lives. The use of interviews helped to inductively explore the various intersections of the adoption of a label among early adult women and allowed participants to share freely about their personal experiences. An inductive approach combined with individual interviews highlighted specific themes and areas for further inquiry (Creswell, 2012; Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997). Furthermore, this approach allowed for in depth understanding of individuals' perceptions and development of their label. The data collected through the study is represented through portraiture, providing researchers and practitioners with a detailed description and analysis of the self-labeling process and

foundational knowledge to engage members of this community. The portraits generated by the study are complex, intentional renderings of each individual's experience, pulling the reader close to the participant through a combination of art and science. The study described here contributes to the literature on sexual identity development and labeling.

Design of the Study

The study is qualitative in nature, heavily drawing on methodology described by portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1986; Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997). This study employs an inductive approach, using semi-structured interviewing and review of self-selected artifacts with each of three participants. The information gathered from the interviews was used to create a narrative portrait of each participant.

Portraiture, as described by Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffman Davis (1997), is a method of social science inquiry that attempts to understand individual experiences and meaning-making, placing processes of human encounter into context through a merging of the arts and social sciences — i.e., connecting the empirical with the interpretive description for the reader. This approach grew from a concern that traditional research methods could not capture the scope of specific phenomena, and plays on the understanding that if authors are thorough in their research and writing they should create a portrait with their descriptions. It places emphasis on rich description and detailed presentation of the material, and focuses on strength in experience, as opposed to pathologizing a particular phenomenon. Portraiture is intended to be written in such a way that promotes accessibility of the research to diverse audiences, not only academics (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2016; Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997).

Lawrence-Lightfoot (2016) describes the process of implementing a portraiture-based methodology by first identifying a “burning” question. In the case of this study, the question is “how do individuals select a label for their sexual identity.” From there, the portraitist must consider where their work will fit into the conversation around this topic. This information has guided the direction and focus of the research, which calls on the collection of data using in depth interviews, portraitist and participant observations, mapping context, and creating relationships with participants. Relationships are viewed as critical to the process, as the purpose of this research is exploration and understanding, with the intent to develop convincing, authentic narratives that include details of the human experience (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2016; Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997). Additionally, there is an emphasis on context in order to accurately interpret the actions and words of participants. Focus on context includes not only the actions and words of participants, but also the aesthetic context as well: visual, auditory, and tactical sensory dimensions of the data collection process. Particular attention has been paid to metaphors, images, allusions, and repetitions that participants use to convey their experience (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2016).

Portraiture facilitates an in-depth exploration of a minimally understood process, while allowing participants the opportunity to explore not only their current label, but the intersecting identities that have influenced them throughout their lives (Remler & VanRyzin, 2015). Additionally, qualitative approaches to queer research are preferred, because they are more likely to accurately portray the experience of oppressed populations (Warner, 2004). The use of this approach not only fits with the basic tenets of

qualitative research, as previously discussed, but directly complements the theoretical framework of intersectionality (Shields, 2008; Syed, 2010), discussed in Chapter One.

Participants

The target population for this study was non- heterosexual self-identified women in early adulthood, between the ages of 26 and 35. This population was identified for the study based on their perceived stability in sexual orientation (Diamond, 2003; Diamond & Wallen, 2011; Savin-Williams & Ream, 2007), secure sense of identity (Erikson, 1968; Levinson, 1978; Schaie & Willis, 2000), and option for variability or flexibility in sexual identity (Bader, 2009; Diamond & Butterworth, 2008; Peplau & Garnets, 2000). These individuals were ideally positioned to thoughtfully reflect on the phenomenon in question from a confident, yet non-restrictive point in their development.

Participant Description

The participants were non-heterosexual, based on their personal self-identification. This allowed for focus on non-majority sexual identities, without limiting the scope of the study to individuals who identify with certain labels. Additionally, the individuals interviewed were in early adulthood, between the ages of 26 and 35. Generally, in the United States, this group grew up in a more accepting, open time than preceding generations, as discussed in the *Cohort effect* section of Chapter Two. The historical and cultural influences, including legal, religious, and sociocultural progress (Murray et al., 2016), that have impacted this population may contribute to a tendency to be more fluid with perception of sexual identity, conceive more options for identifying,

and marry later, allowing more time for fluidity (Bader, 2009; Diamond & Butterworth, 2008).

Participant Selection

Purposeful sampling was used for this study (Chein, 1981; Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2012; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). More specifically, I engaged in maximum variation sampling in order to capture the greatest variety of lived experiences based on age (within the designated age range), religion, race, and/or ethnicity (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). I did not stratify the sample based on sexual identity label because it was possible to gather rich data based on either differences or commonalities in label. Though individuals identified with the same or similar labels, the contributing influences for selecting the label, as well as the lived experience behind the label, varied greatly.

Additionally, priority was placed on individuals from different racial or ethnic groups, based on information gathered in the pilot study (to be discussed). While religion/spirituality was also a commonly referenced influence during the pilot study, the reported influences were similar across religious or spiritual orientations. In order to recruit participants, I deliberately sought out three individuals who met the aforementioned participant description and identified differently from one another in the areas of age (within the defined range), religion, race, and/or ethnicity. The sample size was limited to three participants in order to adhere to the methodology described by Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffman Davis (1997), placing an emphasis on in-depth, detailed data collection and analysis in order to comprehend the scope of an individual's experience related to a specific phenomenon.

Recruitment of participants began based on word of mouth, by communicating the nature of the research and soliciting interest from individuals in my various communities. Individuals who had indicated preliminary interest in participating were provided with a Call for Participants (Appendix A), which explained the nature of the research and offered the opportunity to contact me to set up an interview. To reach maximum variation, participants were then screened for age, religion, race, ethnicity, and self-identification as it relates to gender and sexual identities. Upon indicating interest in participating, each prospective participant was asked to complete the Participant Screening Survey (Appendix B). Eligible participants were accepted on a first come, first served basis, until the variation in the sample was fulfilled. Additional participants beyond the sample of convenience were not needed. The target number of participants for this study was three early adult, non-heterosexual women, distributed throughout the designated age range. These parameters were determined based on previously cited research.

Study Participants

The sampling strategy and recruitment process for this study allowed for variation in participant identification across many constructs. Each participant was given the opportunity to select their own pseudonym during the first interview, reflected below.

1. Tyler is a 27-year-old white, non-Hispanic, woman who identifies as lesbian, holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in Fine Art, and is an artist by profession. She was born and raised in a suburb of a large, urban area in the northeastern United States.

2. Ryan is a 33-year-old black, West-Indian woman who identifies as lesbian and Christian, holds a Master of Arts and is currently pursuing a Doctor of Philosophy degree in a human services field, and works in a helping profession. She was raised on a Caribbean island and immigrated to an urban area in the northeastern United States at the age of 18.
3. Ace is a 26-year-old white, Latina, woman who identifies as gay and Catholic, holds a Juris Doctorate, and practices immigration law in a large, urban area in the northeastern United States. She was born in Spain and immigrated to the United States at the age of two.

The participants' demographic information is also represented in Table 1, below.

Table 1
Demographic Information

Identity	Ryan	Tyler	Ace
Age	33	27	26
Race	Black	White	White
Ethnicity	West Indian	Italian/English	Hispanic
Religious/Spiritual Affiliation	Christian	N/A	Catholic
Current Label	Lesbian	Lesbian	Gay
Relationship Status	Promised	In a Relationship	Engaged
Highest Degree	Master of Arts	Bachelor of Arts	Juris Doctorate
Immigration Status	Dual citizenship since birth	U.S. citizen since birth	U.S. Citizen since 18
Profession	Human Services	Artist	Law

Upon completion of the recruitment process, I was satisfied with the range of identities and experiences represented by the three participants.

Data Collection

There are many types of data collection used in qualitative research. Data collected for this study includes a demographic questionnaire (Appendix D), in-depth, semi-structured interviews (Appendix E), artifacts (e.g., photos, journals, artwork, scrapbooks), and impressionistic records (i.e., a record of my thoughts and impressions throughout data collection and analysis; Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997).

As the researcher, or portraitist, I was the primary research instrument (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). In this role, I was an active listener and observer throughout the research, paying close attention to all stimuli, noting first impressions, and documenting what was familiar as well as what was surprising throughout the research (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997). These impressions were documented in my research journal, reviewed, challenged, and analyzed throughout the course of data collection and analysis.

Semi-structured Interviews

As previously indicated, all three interviews were semi-structured. I employed an interview guide for each interview, and utilized probes to elicit the narrative responses of my participants. Interviews were held at locations that were convenient to each participant, and via video conferencing software as needed. Each interview was audio recorded and subsequently transcribed for analysis. Interview prompts (Appendix E) focused on designated areas throughout each of the interviews. These areas were developed based on a review of the literature, presented in Chapter Two, and the pilot study, to be discussed.

Each interview lasted approximately 90 minutes. At the beginning of each initial interview, the participant completed a brief questionnaire (Appendix D) addressing basic demographic information as well as current and past labels for their sexual identity, information regarding race, ethnicity, education, and other pertinent quantifiable data. The interview consisted of an introduction to the research, rapport building, a review of the demographic questionnaire, and then concentrated on the participant's current and historical sexual identity label, behaviors related to sexual identity label, and various relationships and other identity intersections as they relate to their sexual identity label (Appendix E). The participants had the opportunity to present relevant personal artifacts, such as artwork and photographs, during this interview. All initial interviews were transcribed and, per the constant comparative method of analysis, segments of data were compared to similar segments in order to identify similarities and differences. Similar data segments were grouped together to form categories and, subsequently, patterns within the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

Once the first round of interviews had been transcribed and analyzed, each participant was invited for a second 90-minute interview. Approximately one month after the initial interview, the second interview began with member checking, as needed, and continued with discussion of both religion and/or spirituality and race and/or ethnicity (Appendix E). The participants, again, had the opportunity to present and discuss personal artifacts of their choice. Each interview was transcribed and subsequently analyzed, again, using the constant comparative method of data analysis. Once the second round of data analysis was complete, the cycle repeated for a third and final round of

interviews and analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Patton, 2002). The third and final interview, approximately four months after the second interview, consisted of both member checking and the review and discussion of artifacts, allowing for continued discussion from previous interviews as appropriate. Member checking during the second and third interviews offered each participant the opportunity to co-construct their personal narrative (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The opportunity to follow up with each participant allowed for a more comprehensive view of the individual's experience (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

While each interview was approached with the intent to address specific topics, the structure for these interviews remained flexible in order to allow each participant's narrative to develop naturally, to focus on salient aspects of the individual's life and context, and to follow up on data collected in previous interviews when necessary.

Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffman Davis (1997) suggest flexibility in the design of the research based on the process of data collection and the development of themes; the portraitist must be open to adapting the research throughout the course of the study. I used interview prompts flexibly during the interview process, to this end, as dictated by the conversation during each interview. Each interview gathered specific data from participants, but the questions varied between interviews and were not executed in a predetermined order (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

Artifacts

Prior to the initial interview, each participant was informed that they are welcome and encouraged to share any relevant personal documents or artifacts, such as journals,

scrapbooks, photos, letters, poems, home videos, or artwork from throughout their lives. Participants were able to bring artifacts to any of or all three interviews, where they were photographed or copied (with participants' permission) for data analysis. The artifacts were used as data in and of themselves and narrative prompts, discussed accordingly during the interview process. The artifacts contributed to the richness of the data gathering process by functioning as a method of participant observation. Analysis of each artifact, including consideration of the participant's choice of artifacts, the individual artifact's nature (e.g., artistic; sentimental), medium (e.g., the artifact itself; a photo of the artifact), and subject (e.g., family; religion) provided insight into the attitudes, beliefs, and worldview of the participant, and highlighted what they identify as important to their experience (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

Impressionistic Records

An impressionistic record is similar to a memo, as commonly used in qualitative research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Miles & Huberman, 1994). It is a tool for analysis, reflection, and synthesis to be used by the portraitist. At the culmination of each day of data collection activities, and in between activities as needed, I engaged in thoughtful, written reflection on the data collection process and recorded relevant impressions, ideas, and general thoughts related to the data. The impressionistic record helped with the organization, description, and interpretation of data as it was collected, while tracking and guiding the decision-making process throughout the study. It also assisted in the development of categories and the process of refining codes during data analysis (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997).

Data Analysis

The data included in this study consists of demographic questionnaires, transcriptions of the audio recorded interviews (interviews were transcribed immediately upon their completion), artifacts offered by the participants, and my impressionistic records (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997). The process of data analysis emphasized organization and classification while maintaining the complexity around human experience—making organized sense of the data while acknowledging the disorganized lived experience of the participants (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997). These data were collected and analyzed in tandem, using a constant comparative approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1999; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). A primary feature of a constant comparative approach is that “while coding an indicator for a concept, one compares that indicator with previous indicators that have been coded in the same way” (LaRossa, 2005, p. 841). The constant comparative approach is a common methodology in studies that examine social processes and/or relationships (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997).

Initially, content analysis was used to analyze photographs or copies of the artifacts that were presented during the interview(s). During this process, using the artifacts as data themselves, I analyzed the qualities of each individual artifact for expression of values and allowed them to place the participant’s data in context (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Subsequently, open coding was used across data points to identify themes inductively (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The notations made during the open coding process allowed me to compare data

between and within questionnaires, interviews, artifacts, and impressionistic records. Following the process of open coding, emerging themes were constructed and refined using axial coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2007), or grouping of the open codes according to commonalities (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Throughout the process of analysis, I paid particular attention to repetitive refrains, resonant metaphors, cultural and institutional rituals or customs, and revealing patterns (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997).

The process of data analysis included consultation with my chair, other committee members, and critical friends as codes and themes were identified, and as portraits were developed. Consulting with these various individuals helped me to remain objective in my analysis, encouraged rigor throughout the study, and prompted changes in my perspectives and approaches. The approach described here allowed for a more nuanced understanding of participants' worlds and their meaning making of their sexual identity self-labeling process. Information acquired during data analysis shaped subsequent research activities as the data collection process progressed. On-going coding guided the research activities and influenced the research methodology throughout the cycles of data collection, from interview to analysis back to interview (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997).

Throughout the process of data analysis, it was important *not* to ignore details that were outside of the identified themes. The information offered by outlying information helped me to gain insight into alternate explanations for the studied phenomenon (Maxwell, 2013; Seidman, 2012). Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffman Davis (1997)

identify a perspective that deviates from the norm, or any acquired data that are outside of themes, as “the deviant voice” in order to draw contrast from the norm.

The Portrait

The themes generated through data collection and analyses are presented as three distinct portraits — i.e., one for each participant. Each portrait, understood as a blend of empiricism and aesthetics, offers a vivid narrative of the lived experience of the participant as it relates to the sexual identity self-labeling process. These narratives allow the reader to understand the complex and vibrant nuances of the participants’ experiences. Portrait development began with identifying the context, then finding a stable voice, developing an understanding of the relationship between the portraitist and participants, distinguishing emergent themes, and shaping and evaluating the aesthetic whole.

The portrait itself begins “with an introduction of physical location and of the themes that will organize both the structure of the narrative and the content of the interpretation that is being voiced” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997, p. 265). The themes are presented in an order through which they can naturally build on one another, moving the narrative from the beginning of the whole portrait, to the end. Each portrait has been examined for wholeness based on the following criteria (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997):

- Has contextual information been included as clarifying introduction to and edifying backdrop throughout the portrait?

- Has voice been sufficiently revealed and modulated so that it will inform but not distort the interpretation presented in the portrait?
- Have relationships been respected and faith kept with the actors on the scene throughout the shaping of the final whole?
- Do the identified emergent themes resonate throughout the language and culture of the actors on the site and do they adequately scaffold the interpretation presented in the portrait? (p. 265)

The portraits were also reviewed for differences, similarities, and other opportunities to learn from the experiences of the three participants (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997). Upon completion, each portrait was returned to the corresponding participant to review prior to publication. The opportunity to give feedback on the final portrait, with the intent of integrating the feedback into the portrait, was not offered to the participants. Participants' feedback was not integrated into the content of the portrait in an effort to maintain the integrity of the portraitist's perception of each participant's experience. However, returning the final product to each participant gave them the opportunity to review the product of the study as it relates to their experience, and to voice concerns they may have had about how their information is represented. Upon reviewing their individual portraits, the participants did not voice any significant concerns or request that any content be redacted.

Pilot Study

An IRB approved pilot study along the same line of inquiry was conducted in the Fall of 2014. The pilot study employed a similar qualitative approach to this research. A

sample of convenience was used to recruit four non-heterosexual, self-identified women in early adulthood to participate in one 60-minute interview, and to complete an associated demographic questionnaire. Interview questions used in the pilot study interview can be viewed in Appendix J, and the demographic questionnaire can be viewed in Appendix I.

A number of commonalities were identified from the data collected. These included the influence of religion or spirituality, having at least one non-heterosexual family member or significant influence early in life, and self-identifying consistently since adopting a label for their sexual identity. Additionally, the participants all cited the presence of personal, as opposed to terminological, reasons for identifying with one label over another. They described having had sexual experiences with both men and women, the experience of denying, but never actually changing the label for their sexual identity, in various environments out of convenience or fear, and the adoption of the current label for their sexual identity in their late teenage years.

This pilot study highlighted issues that had not been clearly articulated in the research. The impact of race, ethnicity, gender role, generational issues, internal phobias, and different types of identities and behaviors (i.e. romantic orientation, polyamory) appeared to be salient in the narratives of the participants. These influences have varied roles in the process of assigning a label to one's sexual identity and were explored in the current study.

Trustworthiness

When executing a phenomenological study based in portraiture, the focus of the research is on authenticity as opposed to validity and reliability (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997). More specifically, the concepts of reliability and validity are discussed in terms of trustworthiness when conducting qualitative research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Concepts associated with a study's trustworthiness are based largely around ethics, citing intellectual and procedural rigor, and an appreciation for qualitative research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Patton, 2002). Trustworthiness of this study was ensured by addressing credibility, consistency, and transferability (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

Credibility addresses the ability of the study's findings to coincide with reality. In order to support its credibility, this study employed member checks, adequate engagement in data collection, and peer review (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Member checks, or respondent validation, took place throughout data collection, by soliciting feedback on emerging findings from participants along the way. This process helped to be sure that the data was not being misinterpreted in the process of analysis, and helped to identify researcher bias. Finally, I regularly engaged in peer review with critical friends to confirm the plausibility of findings as data was analyzed (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

Consistency, as opposed to the traditional concept of reliability, refers to the ability of the study's findings to accurately represent the data that were collected, that the findings and data are consistent with one another (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). With the

understanding that the replication of a study that is qualitative in nature will not offer identical results, I engaged in a number of strategies to ensure consistency. In addition to the aforementioned processes of member checks and peer review, I made use of impressionistic records (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997), which can be compared to journaling (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The impressionistic records allowed me to record a detailed account of the analysis and how decisions were made throughout the process. This information was reviewed with colleagues during peer review, as well as directly with members of the dissertation committee.

Portraiture suggests that the classic understanding of generalization is not applicable to this type of research. However, generalization can occur through highlighting the details of an experience with the hope that readers will identify with the humanity and universal themes that are communicated (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997). It is important to move through the process of portraiture with the understanding that “in the particular resides the general” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997, p. 14). Merriam and Tisdell (2015) built on the idea of moving away from generalizability for qualitative research, indicating that transferability, as opposed to generalizability, should be sought by providing sufficient detail regarding the sample and processes of data collection and analysis so that another investigator would be equipped to appropriately apply the study’s findings elsewhere. This study was conducted and described in a way to maximize transparency and transferability (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

Researcher Bias

My personal connection with this research, as discussed in Chapter One, contributed to the study in many ways. However, it also had the potential to influence the design of the methodology and tools, as well as the analysis and interpretation of data. Warner (2004) stresses the importance of portraitists acknowledging their role in the research, since the portraitist is the instrument of research (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997). Throughout the study, it was important to acknowledge and intentionally address any researcher biases and personal assumptions in order to avoid influencing the study (Hays & Wood, 2011; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). As previously discussed, I identify as a non-heterosexual woman in early adulthood, a member of the population that I studied. This positionality offered both advantages and challenges throughout the course of the study.

My familiarity with the population from a personal, academic, and professional perspective allowed for a broad knowledge and understanding of the population. This approach equipped me to more easily and naturally engage with participants during interviews, generating efficient, meaningful discussion (Singhal, 2014). However, given my personal experience, and perceived inaccuracy of labeling for my own sexual identity, it was important for me to not impose preconceived theories onto the different stages of this study.

In addition to my preconceptions about this line of inquiry, various identities and associated experiences had the potential to influence this study. As previously stated, I identify as a white, cisgender, American, Christian, middle-class, highly educated,

lesbian woman who was raised in a dual-parent family in a suburban area of a large city in the Northeastern United States. While these identities qualified me as a member of the sample population, they also had the potential to separate me from the individuals in the study's sample. Not only could these identities have separated me from members of the sample, but all of the aforementioned identities, excluding those of "woman" and "lesbian," carry privilege in the geographic location where the study is taking place. It was important for me to explore and understand how privilege may impact the design, implementation, and data analysis for this study.

To this end, I engaged in reflexivity, critically reflecting on myself, the portraitist, as the study's instrument, over the course of the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). This consisted of discussion with critical friends and mentors, as well as constant journaling and reflection through impressionistic records in order to explore and address any biases that were present in or limiting to the research. The active exploration of my perspective, inviting and pursuing challenges to that perspective along the way, framed the current study and offered sensitivity to the process.

Limitations

A number of limitations to this study exist. In addition to the efforts made in support of trustworthiness, the explanation of limitations is important to the integrity of this research. Limitations of this study include the geographic area, demographic underrepresentation (gender, race, religion, ethnicity, education), and the small sample size. The scope of the findings is limited by the geographic area of data collection. Since the participants currently reside in close proximity to a very large, liberal, northeastern

city, where the study took place, perspectives and experiences reflect the same.

Additionally, while the sample was stratified, it was small and non-representative of national demographics, limiting the generalizability of the findings.

Ethical Issues

The design and nature of this study presented risk for various ethical issues. The study created the opportunity for strong emotional reactions to questions. Similarly, the personal, emotional characteristics of the study required me to maintain firm boundaries between my identity as a researcher and that of a counselor. Additionally, complete anonymity could not be guaranteed due to the possibility of participants being able to be identified through specific experiences. Finally, dual relationships existed since I am a member of the LGBTQ community and drew on personal contacts for participants.

To mitigate the aforementioned ethical issues, the participants were provided with information regarding the potential for emotional reactions and the issues surrounding anonymity prior to agreeing to participate in the study. Participants had the opportunity to decline participation and/or present details of their experience in a way that protected their identity. Additionally, participants were given the opportunity to review their portraits prior to publication of the study, and were able to choose to have information redacted if they identified a need to do so. None of the three participants requested that any portion of their portrait be modified out of concern for their anonymity. Furthermore, I did not enroll any participants with whom I had a direct, personal relationship. This minimized the possibility and/or impact of multiple relationships on the study. While the aforementioned precautions addressed specific ethical issues, constant discussion with

my committee and critical friends, as well as thoughtful reflection and use of impressionistic records, contributed to my overall approach toward safeguarding this study from the risk of ethical concerns.

Conclusion

This chapter described the research design and methodology for the study. This approach explored how individuals describe the process of labeling their sexual identity. Using a phenomenological qualitative approach based in portraiture, I carried out three in-depth interviews with each of three participants in order to generate a rich, narrative portrait of the individual experience of labeling one's sexual identity. Findings are based on qualitative analysis of my notes and interview transcriptions. Based on procedures described in this chapter, the subsequent chapters provide detailed descriptions of a number of interviews with participants as well as discuss themes that will be identified over the course of the data collection process.

Chapter Four: Findings

The Portraits

This qualitative inquiry, based in portraiture, conveys the experience of selecting the current sexual identity label for non-heterosexual women in early adulthood. Upon the completion of three interviews with each of three participants, the data offered by each woman was crafted into a portrait, depicting their experience as it relates to their current selection of the label for their sexual identity. Each portrait was then shared with the respective participant, providing the opportunity for feedback on their representation, and adjusted as necessary to account for the participants' input.

Each participant expressed a consistent understanding of her sexual identity, as well as a persistent quandary related to the language she would use to describe her identity at any point in time. The experience of selecting a label for sexual identity is described as a decision-making process, sometimes subconscious, based on processing of information in context of what each participant knows about herself and about the world around her. She considers her labeling choices based on the potential risks and/or benefits that they may have on her salient identities. This consideration is founded on the amount of privilege or bias that any one specific labeling option may carry in a particular context. When faced with similar amounts of both privilege and bias, an individual chooses a label based on how that label will impact identities that are most important to them in that context.

Five themes, prevalent throughout the data, combine to guide an individual to the selection of her label in any context or moment in time. These include salience of

identities, nature of identities, knowledge of labels, the label's audience, and internalized bias or stigma.

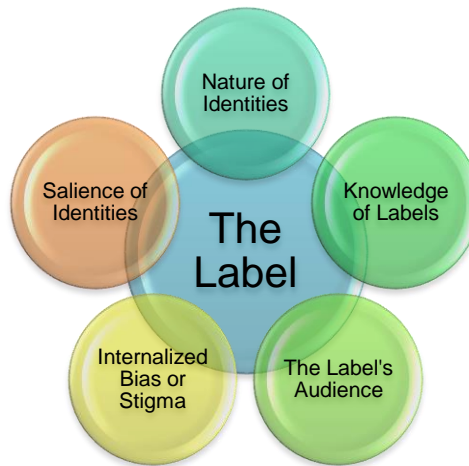


Figure 1. Themes related to label selection.

Each theme manifests throughout each woman's experience in different ways and to different degrees, and is represented within each portrait accordingly. The data emphasized the focus of the labeling experience as less related to how a woman identifies or understands her sexual identity, and more so on how she identifies herself to others and why.

Each participant in this study, Tyler, Ryan, and Ace, offered a deep reflection on her life, identities, and experiences as related to the selection of the label for her sexual identity. Though they often expressed their label selections in a way that could be considered passive, describing their choices as being made because one word is shorter than another (e.g., gay vs. lesbian), or because someone else picked their label for them and they just went with it, their choices proved to be thoughtful and complex. As they spoke with me, each participant was able to deconstruct their choices, ranging from

allowing their relationships to be public enough for their peers to assign a label to them, to adopting incongruent labels to protect them in specific contexts. They each made label decisions motivated by concern and protection —physical, professional, relational, emotional —for both themselves and the people that they cared for. Each theme, identified above, will be articulated through the perspective of each participant.

“Tyler”

The daughter. The artist. The lover. The tortured soul. Fair skin, brown eyes, thick, round-framed glasses. A bundle of contradictions that were not necessarily contradictory to her at all. My first meeting with Tyler was on a cold, stormy evening in February. She arrived at our meeting dressed casually, wearing a white t-shirt, grey sweatshirt, and maroon sweatpants. She was eager to get started with our conversation.

The air was cold in the house, and we could hear the rain and sleet on the windows outside. We settled into the floral couches in the sitting room of my mother’s house, an in-between point from where we both lived. Tyler, 27 years old at the time of the interviews, kicked off her shoes and pulled back her long, straight, dark brown hair in a loose pony-tail, revealing a blonde and pink dyed undercut, before tucking her legs beneath her. Before we began, she asked if she could record the conversation as well, so she could listen back to it on her own. I agreed, and she paralleled my process throughout our time together, bringing new thoughts and reflections to each subsequent interview based on what she had heard listening back to the last.

Before we started talking, Tyler completed a brief demographic questionnaire. She went through, question by question, asking for clarification when she was unsure

about a term or language on the form. “Lesbian,” she wrote, when prompted to list the current label for her sexual identity; “straight, bisexual” for her previous labels. As we discussed her responses, she explained the evolution of her label candidly,

Well I always knew I was gay. I was pretty aware of it in 4th grade, which is pretty young, but I used straight until high school because I wasn’t willing to be gay, so you just say you like men. Bisexual was after I had had my first girlfriend, early high school, and I still wasn’t willing to admit I didn’t like men at all so I used bi, and then realized I didn’t like that, and eventually I gave that up and became a lesbian.

It all seemed to be straightforward. A natural progression from where she was to where she is today.

Tyler began her life in a place of support. Raised in an environment where same-sex relationships were considered to be just as valid as opposite-sex relationships and feeling no pressure from her family to adhere to a monosexual identity, Tyler felt comfortable with her feelings for women as soon as she noticed they were there. Though she was the first person in her school to come out as LGBTQ, to her knowledge, Tyler’s cousin, Maggie, had been in a relationship with a woman for as long as she could remember. “A second set of parents,” as she referred to them, these women were the model for stability in Tyler’s eyes. Maggie never talked about her identity; it was always just understood. As such, Tyler had a limited knowledge of labels, identifying only “gay” and “straight” as perceived options until she reached high school and became familiar with the term “bisexual.” However, the use of labels was not necessary for same-sex

relationships to be normalized for her from a young age. Tyler never had to feel alone in her feelings for women, she never had to wonder if her family would accept her or how they would react. The expression of her sexual identity did not put her identity within her family at risk.

As she reflected on her experience, Tyler became uneasy when directly discussing her label. Eventually, her once confident response to the prompt to identify a label turned into “maybe I need to stop saying I’m a lesbian... labels get me so confused.” So how did she move from “lesbian,” to “maybe I need to stop saying I’m a lesbian”?

Tyler described not feeling “attached to a label... [she feels like she loves] a specific kind of heart and it generally lies in women,” but she also shared that she has been attracted to and had brief relationships with men over the years.

Even if I am a lesbian, even if I’ll only ever be with women, I don’t like to discount what else is in the world. I generally think that I will end up with a woman, I’d love to have a wife, but I don’t like to discount the fact that maybe there’s a man out there that’s supposed to be with me, and if he is then cool, if not, then whatever.

She expressed an assumption that she would end up with a woman, while maintaining a comfort with and openness to life’s possibilities. Though she uses the term lesbian “pattern-wise,” indicating that most of her relationships are with women, she does not discount what the future may hold for her. While discussing labels from different perspectives, she talked about the concept being “hard” for her. “It just attaches itself to

some permanence for me that I don't align with." However, her uneasiness about labels did not and does not stop her from choosing one.

Attempting to articulate a reason for the selection of her label, she described a pattern of selecting labels for her sexual identity for the sake of others. "I say I'm a lesbian, I say I'm gay, whichever. I feel like I mostly say that for other people." Adept at reading context, Tyler began to describe a pattern of choosing labels when she believes she needs to. First when she was completing the questionnaire, and now as she described choosing labels for other people.

However, her choice to exclude "gay" from the questionnaire, but to include it in conversation highlights the flexibility in her language, as well as her disconnection from her selected labels. The language she chooses to express her identity not only changes based on her audience throughout contexts in her life, but casually moving from lesbian to lesbian or gay, her label had changed within the first sixty minutes of our time together. This suggests that she understands certain labels to carry little specificity as they relate to her expression, and selects her language based on other considerations.

Lesbian or Gay? But Why Not Bisexual?

With her statement, "I say I'm a lesbian, I say I'm gay," Tyler introduced a new label for herself, "gay."

I always just associated lesbian with a woman's term... I don't think I use lesbian for any other reason than I just was taught or kind of just thought or knew that it was associated with a female... I was literally taking it as 'I have a vagina, so I'm a lesbian.'

Her explanation suggested that “lesbian” was the label she was supposed to use because of her identity as a woman, with “gay” being a term that is more appropriate for a man. However, she commented that she is comfortable using both terms to describe her sexual identity.

This thoughtful description of her choice of label carried meaningful contradictions when compared with the other ways in which Tyler views herself. Raised primarily by her mother, as an only child, Tyler emphasized the significance of her identity as a daughter. She and her mother were and are everything to one another. After sharing that her mother had a series of ill-fated marriages and relationships with men throughout her life, up until Tyler was in high school, she explained that her mom had not had a significant romantic relationship in almost ten years. Tyler described what followed her mother’s last relationship as “all of a sudden, I became her boyfriend, and I have been dating her ever since.”

After moving away for college for four years, Tyler returned home to live with her mother while building her business. Having been her mother’s primary relationship for nearly a decade, Tyler and her mother developed a mutual accountability to one another. Tyler had assumed the “manly duties” in the home and their lives when she was a teenager. “I tend to be more masculine,” she explained. She would mow the lawn, rake the leaves, fix things around the house, and was expected to plan her life according to these responsibilities. At twenty-seven years old, if she spent the night at a girlfriend’s house during a snowstorm, she was expected to come home early the next morning to

shovel the driveway. Part of this is her love of being hands-on and self-sufficient, “the gender role of a man,” she described. The other part is a feeling of obligation to her mother. In the role as her mother’s partner, Tyler feels trapped. As her mother plans her life according to Tyler’s physical and financial contributions to the home, Tyler becomes more and more entrenched in her role as her mother’s significant other, struggling to break free and build a life of her own, while not letting down the only constant support she has ever known.

Tyler chose a label of “lesbian” based on her gender identity as a woman, identified as her mother’s “boyfriend” based on her responsibilities within their relationship, and generally described herself as “more masculine.” These reflections made it clear that she sees herself as fulfilling a gender role that is traditionally masculine, began to articulate the nature of her identity as a woman, and illustrated the relationship between gender identity and sexual identity as Tyler understands it.

Tyler’s struggle with her label intensifies with a history of intimate relationships with both men and women. With these relationships challenging her labels of both “lesbian” and “gay,” Tyler explained why she adheres to a monosexual label. While “bisexual,” by definition, may more accurately describe the behaviors related to her sexual identity, Tyler made it clear that she does not “feel like a bisexual.” She described a pattern of dating more women than men, and having no problem being physically intimate with men, but described her relationships with them as “fillers” and “a general retreat from having to feel.”

Tyler has put a lot of thought into her distance from men.

I can't exactly identify what it is, but I always feel more distanced from men than from women. I don't know if there's a fear there or an issue, I've never been able to identify what it is that makes me feel further away, because... it's not like a lack of conversation or a lack of depth. I've had many deep conversations with guys before, about life, things that if I had those conversations with a girl, it would make me feel close to them, and it doesn't happen with men.

Having traced it back to specific points in her life such as her father having "abandoned" her as a young child, and being sexually assaulted by a male friend in high school, Tyler has tried to make sense of her inability to connect with men. However, she struggles to connect the dots.

Now, so many years later, thinking about it... I had a stepfather who raised me, I have uncles who love me... It doesn't really make sense to me... I've been taken advantage of, but it's not anything that's really, those specific situations haven't really stayed with me like to the point of damage.

Even more, she has worked to build a relationship with her father in recent years, and is close with her half-brother. It was almost as if Tyler was trying to navigate a labyrinth related to connecting with men, having had both negative and positive experiences with them. She described a process of refining the scope of her relationships with men, expressing a healthy wariness around experiences that have hurt her in the past.

Her distance from men, combined with an internal bias against the term "bisexual" because she associates it with being a "floosy," as opposed to truly representing individuals who are attracted to both men and women, led Tyler to her

“lesbian” label. However, significant hesitations for Tyler are her openness when it comes to connecting with others, and her struggle with the permanence that she attaches to labels. “I have never discounted that if some man showed up and I fell in love with him that I would not be with him.”

Again, Tyler knows herself. It is not a question of her identity or who she is attracted to, her struggle is around the language. “Maybe I need to stop saying I’m a lesbian... how do you just remove the sex from the labels... I don’t know what I would be if I just restarted with all the words.” Though intentionally referring to the label for her sexual identity, Tyler’s statement more broadly addresses her perspective on language. Taking cues from the commonly accepted binary language used in the world around her, Tyler consistently contradicts herself. She acknowledges that her language and labels could be different, could fit together in a new way, but struggles to wrap her head around what that might look like, particularly given the limits in our language systems.

For Other People

Tyler has always been sure of her sexual identity. “I know a lot of people struggle, they went through that gap of time where they hated themselves for it, I never had that, I never felt like it was wrong.” Though she never let the opinions of others impact how she saw herself, she did let their opinions impact how she presented herself.

Revisiting her statement, “I say I’m a lesbian, I say I’m gay, whichever. I feel like I mostly say that for other people,” Tyler asserted that the selection of her label was for other people. She elaborated, suggesting that choosing a commonly understood monosexual label, based on society’s expectations, was “easier for people to wrap their

head around.” However, it became apparent that there was more to her statement as she described the expression of her label to various audiences and how their perceptions influenced her choices between contexts.

Friends in middle school. She reflected on the first time she tried to come out as having feelings for women to a group of friends in sixth grade:

I had made a joke about it, I was like testing the waters you could say, I was like ‘oh I have a crush on her...’ and it wasn’t received well... they freaked out and talked about it for days, like ‘are you being serious like, do you like me,’ and I was like ‘no, I don’t.’ It was almost like they got freaked out that we had sleepovers and I had slept next to them, and they were asking themselves if I had feelings for them. So immediately I was like ‘no, I take it back it was just a joke, relax.’

With her friends rejecting her possible non-heterosexual identity, Tyler decided to change her expression to them. At the time, her friend group was the audience that had the most impact on her life, and their opinions mattered to her. Having realized that sharing her feelings with her friends put her identity within that context at risk, Tyler reverted to a heterosexual identity —until her priorities began to shift.

Peers in high school. Four years later, a sophomore in high school, Tyler had her first girlfriend, Stephanie. Banned by Stephanie’s mother from seeing one another outside of school. At this point, Tyler made a choice. Her identity as a member of this relationship was so significant at the time, that she assessed the possible risks associated with her peers finding out about her relationship with Stephanie to be worth it, and they

made their relationship public. “I didn’t give a shit what people thought of me.” Kissing at their lockers, holding hands in the hallways, they were no longer hiding. “The whole school was like ‘what are you doing, are you a lesbian?’ And I was like ‘I guess so, sure, I don’t know, your guess is as good as mine.’”

Tyler was focused on her relationship with Stephanie, and her identity as Stephanie’s girlfriend. She did not feel strongly attached to another label, did not perceive a need to deny her relationship with Stephanie, and felt no need to otherwise advocate for herself – so she accepted the label assigned by her peers. However, the stigma around non-heterosexual identities that Tyler had sensed from her peers over the years had made her hesitant, and Tyler was still not sure if she was “willing to be gay.” She thought of herself as bisexual for another year and a half until she grew comfortable with the idea of a public monosexual identity, and “knew [she] wasn’t going to date guys anymore.” However, she publicly accepted the label of “lesbian.” Adopting this label required the least amount of effort and had no meaningful impact on how she viewed herself at the time – maintaining her perception of herself as attracted to both men and women because she was not yet sure, but now publicly identifying as lesbian.

Employers. Tyler reflected on a time during her college years when she worked as a nanny, often for families that she did not know well, and how that role impacted the expression of her sexual identity.

I don’t care if someone hates me or doesn’t, but when it comes to children, I don’t ever want, it’s their children, they’re allowed to raise them and have them however they want, so it’s really not my place to impact that life in any way other

than for safety, so I never wanted it to be a situation where I was making [the parents] uncomfortable.

Tyler described not caring if someone is homophobic, but not disclosing and/or actively denying her sexual identity or the gender identity of her partner because she believed it to be irrelevant to her ability to care for a child. The audience for Tyler's label in this situation was the family of the children she was caring for, and Tyler perceived a sense of privilege associated with a heterosexual label. She selected the label to express her sexual identity to this audience based on the identity that was important to her at the time, her role as a caregiver, and her perceived lack of risk to other identities.

By this point in her life, Tyler understood her sexual identity as possibly carrying stigma for others. She made a choice, based on her context, which reflected her belief that the parents may have worried that hiring a lesbian to care for their children may somehow place their child at risk. Believing that her identity as a lesbian had no impact on how the children would be cared for, she once again chose the path of least resistance. By adjusting the expression of her sexual identity in this situation to one that she perceived to carry more privilege, based on her lack of familiarity with how the family perceives non-heterosexual identities, Tyler was able to help her employers to trust her while not putting any of her other identities at risk. The family had a nanny that fit their needs, Tyler was not at risk of incurring negative repercussions based on her sexual identity (e.g., the loss of her job; homophobic remarks), and the nature of her identities was not impacted.

Strangers. Tyler went on to discuss the thought of identifying herself to the general public.

I feel like when, say, at a bar, someone says, you know, ‘are you, is this your girlfriend? Oh, are you a lesbian?’ It’s just easier for me to say ‘yes.’ Or, ‘what are you?’ ‘I’m a lesbian.’ I don’t even feel like actually sitting down and having the conversation with people.

Consistent with her expression over the years, Tyler chooses to identify with a monosexual label that is most closely aligned to her relationship patterns —lesbian. “If I do say, god forbid, ‘oh I’m a lesbian but when I’m single I sleep with men,’ it’s like ‘what?! You have to make me understand why. You’re not gay!’” Lacking language to express a more accurate version of her sexual identity, and having no desire to explain herself to people in passing, she adheres to a label that she believes is easy for others to understand.

For other people, but on her own terms. Tyler illustrated a pattern around her labeling choices. They were based on several influences. Considering not only what her audience wanted or expected, and how they might judge her, but also on what Tyler perceived to most accurately describe herself while providing the least amount of resistance in a situation.

In her day to day life, Tyler moves through her world in ways that just let her be; ways that leave her free from both explaining and even advocating for herself. Describing herself as a low energy person, and not particularly excitable, she used the term “zen” to describe herself on more than one occasion. Tyler connected her temperament to her

tendency to avoid involvement in groups. For example, being active as an advocate for the LGBTQ community was never for her: “I don’t feel the need to parade around who I am.” By choosing a label with her audience in mind, or “for other people” as she described it, Tyler gives herself the freedom from advocating for or explaining herself in ways that would make her uncomfortable.

Not only can she avoid having to explain herself to others by choosing a label based on her audience, she can also take advantage of any privilege available to her. Tyler expressed an uncanny tendency to read a situation and to seamlessly adjust her expression. Through evaluation of her context, she critically assesses how her choices may place her at either an advantage or a disadvantage.

Tyler struggled to identify experiences with selective outness or oppression based on her sexual identity in her adult life. The world that she currently moves within, a world that Tyler has designed and created for herself, puts her in a position where she has little to hide, and little need to. As she spoke more about her current profession and relationships, compared with her early life, Tyler’s pieces seemed to fall into place. Not only did the pieces fall into place, but there was a quiet sense of brilliance around where she is now versus where she has been – and how she got there.

She described her current occupation as an “artist,” and has built her own business from the ground up. “Generally, I work alone because I have my own art business. So, I’m just painting and doing my own thing.” Her roles as an independent artist and small business owner provide her with a significant amount of autonomy, both in her work and in selecting the people around her, which carries a freedom of expression. Her

professional circumstances, spending much of her time working independently, and gaining referrals from her network of family and friends, allow for distance from others who may not support her identity. She can self-select many of the individuals around her, influencing the audiences for her label, and subsequently generating little cause for selective outness.

Tyler's patterns of expression for her sexual identity do not seem to have changed. She continues to choose the language for her identity based on how it might ease the experience of both herself, and the people around her. However, she has exerted more control over her audiences, yielding a freedom in her expression on a daily basis. Even so, her choices in her expression never seemed to change how she saw herself. It was always the same Tyler, only showing different parts of herself as she decided was necessary or appropriate.

A Change in (Social) Location

Tyler's choice of language used to express her sexual identity has not only been influenced by her audience at a certain place or time, but by how she came to understand her sexual identity over time. While she expressed a firm understanding of her sexual identity from a young age, knowing that she was attracted to both men and women, but in different ways, she did not always find herself in a place where she could be herself.

I felt just kind of I was in the wrong place. I felt not at home in any situation that I was in. I felt like the town I was in was a very white, hoity toity town and I... just kind of assumed that 'this will never be the place where I thrive as who I am...' it

was just kind of a lot of waiting around, like ‘when am I gonna graduate so I can get the hell out of here?’

Recognizing that a change in her environment might have an impact on how she expressed herself, Tyler anxiously pushed through her high school years. However, when the time came to plan for college, she hesitated. Art school “was a mistake from the get go.”

I didn’t want to not want to go college because I didn’t want to go to college. I didn’t want to go to college because I knew, mentally, I wasn’t stable enough to make a decision like that at that point, and I also didn’t know what I wanted and didn’t know why I was gonna go spend a hundred thousand dollars to be somewhere and not know what my goal was, and I started to believe that oh my god if I don’t go now, maybe I’ll get lazy and I’ll never go. And now I graduated and I have a degree in art and I still want to go back to school, and now I want to learn, so I was right, you idiots. You should have listened to me, I tried to tell you and you didn’t believe me because I was 17, but I was right... so now it’s like I’m not *not* proud of it, I’m glad I have a degree, I’m glad I can say I went and I obviously had good experiences, but now I’m at the point where I want to go back and I’m bitter about it because I have \$80,000 in debt and I’m just gonna go add to it, it doesn’t feel good.

Responding to a culture of expectation around attending college immediately after high school, she attended a four-year college after graduating high school and studied art, because “it was the only thing that made sense.” Despite her resistance to taking this step

at this time, she noted having “good experiences,” and was finally given the opportunity to “thrive” that she had been waiting for.

After arrangements for Tyler to attend and move away for college were made, she was all-in. Immersing herself, in her own way, in her new environment, Tyler began to carve out a life that fit for her. Her choice to attend college, seemingly made, once again, for other people, gave Tyler a platform to begin fulfilling her needs in a way she had not yet felt comfortable doing. To the best of her ability, Tyler shed the expectations associated with her role in her mother’s house, as well as her role as the first person to come out in her high school. She soon found herself a member of a large LGBTQ community at her college, growing into and expressing her identity in new ways.

The audience for her label was fresh and accepting, and the lesbian identity was normalized. Without the stigma imposed by her peers in high school, and her “hoity-toity” community, the question of whether or not she was “willing to be gay” quieted. This highlights how Tyler’s internalized stigma has changed over time —nonexistent until middle school when her friends rejected her identity, until college, eased by a new environment for her expression. Her social identity was no longer at risk of being impacted by her sexual identity, and the nature of her identity came into focus. Tyler became more comfortable with both her public and private identities as a lesbian, and fully embraced this label. She began to form meaningful relationships, learning how strongly she would come to identify as a member of a relationship.

“My relationships take up most of who I am.” Tyler’s fever for attachment to others quickly built her a reputation. Labeled as a “serial dater,” “heartbreaker,” and “the

center of the classic *L Word* lesbian web,” Tyler grew to regret her behavior in college. While she described her behavior as well-intended at the time, believing she had a genuine connection that she was trying to pursue with each of these individuals, she now understands how it looked to others. “If I could go back, I would do it differently... I didn’t know.” As she grew older, she became aware of the pieces of herself that she was unhappy with – one of which was “serial dater.” Though it spoke to the salience of her identity as a member of a relationship, as well as confirmed the nature of her sexual identity toward a preference for women, it put her in a position of constantly pushing her needs aside for others, only to hurt them in the end.

At What Cost

Tyler’s pattern of choosing which parts of herself to share with others was not exclusive to her experience of labeling her sexual identity. “I just always felt like a big part of me was how much and how hard I loved somebody.” She consistently described a focus on relationships, and on her priorities as being related to her identity as a member of a relationship. For Tyler, that focus manifested as publicly being whatever someone else – her mother, her friends, her significant others – needed her to be. As she spoke, she revealed a price that she has paid, and continues to pay, for putting the needs of others before her own.

Motivated by a desire to ease the immediate experience of both others and herself, Tyler’s commitment to limiting her expression until she would reach a breaking point became clear. Since she was a child, Tyler has been careful to mediate the expression of her needs, first in her relationship with her mother, then in every relationship to follow.

Tyler views her mother as “the only concrete bond and constant in” her life, “she’s less like a mother; more like a best friend.” Their relationship is illustrated by a tattoo of a mother and daughter embracing (Figure 2), that Tyler got on her back as a teenager.



Figure 2. Tattoo of mother and daughter embracing

Describing it as “a tribal weave of a mother holding a daughter to just represent the bond that we have,” Tyler identified this tattoo as one of her most significant. This work of art brought Tyler’s relationship with her mother to life, while highlighting her passion for artistic expression. It was noteworthy that the representation of power between the figures was somewhat contradictory to her previous assessment of her mother as her “best friend.” She sees her mother as two sides of a coin: “open-mind[ed]... smart [and] deep,” paired with “narcissistic, dominant, [and] scary.” Tyler struggles to negotiate her perception of her mother with the difficulty she has with expressing her needs to her mother without a fear of retribution. “I’m afraid of her, truthfully... every time we’ve ever had a fight, I’ve ended it first because it would last forever.” Rarely speaking up for herself out of a feeling of responsibility to maintain the relationship, Tyler decided it was easier to keep her desires and opinions to herself.

Tyler came across as confident, talented, and comfortable with herself, yet she found herself in a cycle of disassociation from her own thoughts, feelings, and needs in relationships throughout her life. She would make choices to avoid confrontation, which allowed many relationships to take on a life of their own, forming and continuing because Tyler did not want to stop them from doing so. Though she had described herself as “selfish,” a thread of selflessness ran through her stories like a vein of gold —always wanting others to be happy, comfortable, and loved.

As Tyler grew older, she carried with her an understanding of her needs as secondary to those of others in her life. “I’ve always wanted people to feel loved more than I’ve loved.” This pattern of psychologically removing herself from relationships in an effort to be what the other person wanted or what she thought she should be has helped her to navigate the expression of her sexual identity in a way that eases her immediate, or superficial experience (depending on the context). However, Tyler shared a history of mental health issues, possibly both contributing to and compounded by her people-pleasing tendencies, which she has struggled with over the years. These issues ranged from suicidal ideation and substance abuse to diagnoses of depression, obsessive compulsive disorder, and bipolar disorder, resulting in several in-patient psychiatric experiences since high school.

During our first interview, Tyler shared a drawing that she had made early in her college years, almost ten years ago, after being prompted to draw how she felt (Figure 3).



Figure 3. How she felt.

“I’ve always felt just generally stuck, like something was always holding my foot, or not able to excel in ways that others can because I have this thing that never goes away...”

She explained that the rock represented her mental health issues, always holding her down. Tyler’s choice of this artifact – a piece that she created while working to improve her creativity, after being prompted by her half-brother, and illustrating her struggle with mental health —wrapped many of her values in a tight little package. She went on to note that she would shift focus to her own needs only after her mental health would deteriorate to a point where she could not focus on anything else. After a series of emotionally charged relationships and what she perceived to be ineffective, inconsistent care for her mental health, Tyler knew that something had to change. She had to find a balance between taking care of herself and taking care of the people around her.

Tyler allows her pain to motivate her to not only take action in life, but to transform it into art. An artist through-and-through, as Tyler began to integrate her struggles into her identity in her mid-twenties, she immortalized a piece of advice given to her by her mother with another tattoo – “The only way out ;s through” (Figure 4).



Figure 4. Tattoo of "The only way out ;s through"

My mom has said that to me since I was young. Everything that ever happened that was bad, she said it to me a lot during the hospital stint, being gay, any heartbreak or anything like that, she always, cuz you always feel like the world is ending, it's terrible and she was like 'stop trying to turn the pain off,' she was like 'you have to just feel it... the only way out is through...' I think the first time she said that to me was when I came out and I was having a hard time at school, and everyone knew... people were pointing fingers at me, screaming things in the halls and stuff like that and she was like 'the only way out is through, they're gonna get over it, you just kind of have to ride the wave...' She always said things are never over until they are, so that always sat heavy for me... and then, the i in the 'is' is a semicolon... the semicolon itself is an author can choose to end his sentence but decides not to. So, I've spent most of my life having been suicidal and having periods of time where I didn't want to live, and you know it's 'I could choose to end my sentence, but I don't want to.' So, it fits within the only way out is through, so it kind of all ties in. It's one of my proudest ones.

This tattoo illustrates the strength that Tyler has built over the years, while highlighting her bond with her mother. Her best friend since childhood, her mother has been her sounding board and her safe place – offering the words that help her to push through life's obstacles.

Not long after immortalizing her mother's words, Tyler found herself in a romantic relationship with her best friend of five years, Dylan. With a history of misinterpreting friendship for romance, Tyler might have predicted the course of this relationship—but she could not have predicted where it would lead her. A short time into this romantic version of their former relationship, Tyler realized that this was not what she wanted.

...It was mature, it was the first time where I had the layout of a perfect relationship and still wasn't in love and I was like 'holy shit this is the landmark of I need to start saying when I do and don't feel this thing that I want.' And that was a big growth thing for me, to be like I don't want to be with you, for any other reason than chemistry, that we don't have it. I had never said those words. I had never spoken that. I had always been like oh it's just situational, it's not working we fight too much, blaming it on something else, rather than I don't feel this for you. That was probably the first time I ever spoke up for how I actually felt. Any time I left anyone otherwise was 'oh I can't be with you because this is toxic,' or 'you're emotionally abusive,' or 'I can't be with you because we fight too much,' or "our schedules are f***ed up.' There were always ways for me to get around the fact that I'm not in love...

The trust and honesty on which this relationship was built encouraged Tyler to express herself in ways that she had never done before – with anyone in her life. Tyler marked this relationship as a turning point for her, the “realization of the fact that [she] never put [her]self first.” This was the point at which the scale began to tip. Tyler began to change the way she made decisions, departing from her choices based on the needs of others, toward considering her own needs in the process.

This change did not come easily for Tyler. Upon the end of her relationship with Dylan, Tyler felt very alone. Not knowing what to do with her newly found freedom and perspective, her identity as a member of a relationship was suffering —Tyler was desperate for connection. She became close with a new friend, Kate, and found the relationship to be riddled with blurred lines and self-destructive behavior. In a downward spiral, quickly approaching rock bottom, Tyler finally put herself first and admitted herself into a psychiatric facility. Though this was not the first time that she had sought help from a mental health professional, this was the first time that she received what she felt to be the appropriate care.

With a focus on herself and a mental clarity that she had never known before, Tyler was ready for the change that had been waiting for her. As she untangled herself from her previous life, she found herself at the start of something new. By our final interview, Tyler had a new energy, and shared that she was in a committed relationship. “It’s awesome.” This relationship has brought a new normal to Tyler’s life – feeling understood, able to express her needs, and evenly matched. Understanding herself as an

equal in a relationship that she perceives to be based on a mutual intimate connection and respect, this relationship is everything she never knew she never had.

Her initial rock-and-balloon drawing (Figure 3) compared with her recently renewed perspective on life prompted me to suggest that she create a new piece – to draw how she feels today, almost ten years after her first drawing, and in a wildly different place in her life. Happy to take on the challenge, Tyler returned to our final interview with a new drawing. The same rock, but this time it was hovering just above the ground, held up by three balloons (Figure 5).

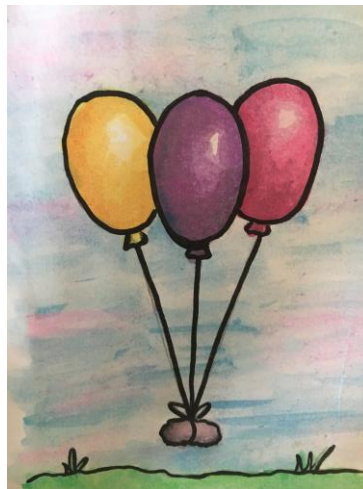


Figure 5. How she feels.

...the balloons are just a representation of the pieces of me and my life and, you know, a big one is the medication... It's kind of the things that I need in order to feel lighter... So, I am the rock. It's just a matter of, you know, my puzzle pieces essentially... helping me to fly. I didn't want it to be like this thing, oh, like I'm soaring through the air, because it will always be a piece of me, like the depression will always be this heavy thing that I have. It's just a matter of the life

experience and how you deal with it and the drugs and you know, it's a combination of all of those things... So that's why it's like a bunch of balloons.

It's like you need that. You need the bunch in order for you to get off the ground.

As she described the new drawing, Tyler's shift in perspective was evident—not only from the point at which she completed the first drawing, but even since our first meeting almost six months before. Now understanding the balloons as the positive pieces of her life, she seemed to acknowledge how her actions to achieve these things (e.g., pursuing treatment for her mental health; making choices in her relationships that reflected her needs) have contributed to her new perspective.

Overshadowed by the salience of both her mental health status and her identity as a member of a relationship, the expression of the nature of her sexual identity has rarely been the focus of her energy. However, Tyler expressed a history of finding herself tangled between the nature of these two identities (mental health status and member of a relationship). The ease that she displayed related to her sexual identity was representative of what she perceived to be her “zen” nature, her focus on easing the experience of others, and her aversion to advocating for her own needs (in relationships or expression), all of which came at the expense of her mental health and/or emotional stability throughout her life.

Final Thoughts

Raised in a family environment that was open to same-sex relationships, it was not until she cautiously began to share her identity with her peers in middle school that Tyler realized the support she was accustomed to at home was not the standard. This was

the point at which Tyler began to make choices about her expression—who gets what information, and when do they get it? She was and continues to be intentional in how she allows others to see her, even up to and through the point when she began to publicly display her relationships with women.

Tyler chooses her label based on her gender identity in relation to her knowledge of labels, and pattern of being with and preferring women over men, but lacking the language to specifically and simply express the nature of her identity to others. She never considered her sexual identity to be a significant issue or obstacle in her life, but more of a temporary, contextual stressor. Its perceived lack of salience, coupled with her desire to ease the experience of both herself and others, contributed to an organic development of her label—letting it grow and change as her environment suggested.

Tyler spent much of our time together discussing her frustration with labels and the influence of others on her label selection. After considering the option of relabeling herself with a more masculine label, such as “gay,” to more closely align with how she perceives the nature of her gender expression, Tyler emphatically stated “I don’t like to label myself at all... How do you label yourself if you don’t care about labels?” Not interested in adopting a new label because she does not care about labels and is not aware of a more accurate expression of her nature of her sexual identity, or in completely abandoning a label because she perceives it as requiring a measure of advocacy in explaining her choices to others, Tyler finds comfort in how her current constellation of identities and their expression fit together in her life. Once again, Tyler presents a bundle of contradictions that are not necessarily contradictions at all.

“Ryan”

The West Indian. The black woman. The scholar. The counselor. The faithful. Our first meeting took place in a small, professional office, on loan to me from my University’s counseling clinic —foreign to both of us. We settled into the cold chairs late in the evening in the beginning of February. Ryan was coming directly from another commitment and appeared flustered at first, taking some time to unwind.

She described her style as feminine-androgynous, and joked that she was a “hundred-footer,” meaning you could tell she was gay from a hundred feet away. The first night we met, she wore burgundy sweat pants and a green shirt, with shearling slipper shoes, and her hair styled in a self-described faux hawk. Her dark hair, eyes, and skin vividly contrasted with her warm, infectious smile. Her strong Caribbean accent and the occasional use of culture-specific language highlighted the fact that she has not always called the United States “home.”

Ryan shared that her participation in this study was “perfect timing.” “My life is actually changing right now. It’s shifting massively. It’s crazy to be talking about it.” At 33 years old, the pieces of Ryan’s life were beginning to fall into place. Since a young age, she has been working to understand herself as holding a myriad of identities seemingly in conflict with one another —Lesbian, Christian, West Indian, failure, academic, teacher, black, advocate, daughter. While her work to understand her intersecting identities within and between contexts is not done, it has paid off. With a firm understanding of her identities and how they interact with one another, Ryan is strong and driven.

Having very recently made significant strides in building her life toward what she wants it to be, Ryan was primed to reflect on her growth over the years. Having identified as “lesbian” since she was 20, but knowing she was attracted to women long before then, Ryan reflected on the journey related to her sexual identity, starting at the beginning.

I moved to the states when I was... 16. So, before that, I was living in [the Caribbean] and really um always, I guess in retrospect, I understand now that I’ve always had this attraction for women... liked being with women... had very strong feelings for women, but I never knew that that was a thing, to be a lesbian. I didn’t know that it was really something. I didn’t know that like two women could be in a relationship, but I always knew that these strong feelings would always preoccupy my time. But... the only thing to be was heterosexual, the only thing to be was straight. I didn’t know anything else.

A Barrier Larger than Language

As Ryan spoke, it was clear that she had already put some thought into the language for her sexual identity. She recalled having heard the word “lesbian” when she was as young as 13 years old.

I remember thinking that a lesbian was a woman who thought she was a man, and I remember thinking ‘I am not a lesbian – I don’t dress like a boy, I don’t think I’m a boy,’ you know? At the time I was slimmer, so I was wearing very short clothes, you know, I didn’t identify with that word, lesbian. I just rejected it as part of... or even a possibility of being that.

Not only did she not *identify* with her understanding of the term lesbian, but it carried stigma in West Indian culture. The idea of a “feminine lesbian” was an oxymoron, it made people question why someone who presented in such a way would be with a woman. “She can get any man she wants... why is she like that?” An identity of lesbian immediately suggested that a woman was “butch,” their “gender expression was very masculine” – they were referred to as a “man john.” A derogatory term, synonymous with lesbian —this was the root of the stigma for Ryan.

At the time, her logic was clear, “I didn’t think I was a guy, and only guys and girls can be together.” She *was not* a lesbian, and she *could not* date women. Ryan focused much of our initial conversation on the term lesbian, and why it was not a fit for her during her teenage years, having first identified as heterosexual, then briefly identifying as bisexual during her freshman and sophomore years of college. In fact, she alluded to the term *still* not being a fit for her in her adult life.

By acknowledging that she liked women from a young age and that her culture did not provide a frame of reference for understanding her feelings through either exposure or language, Ryan foreshadowed struggles that she would come to know in time. With a limited knowledge of existing labels and what they meant, Ryan found it difficult to articulate her feelings for women. Identifying as heterosexual, Ryan dated boys in high school, but it was never serious or intimate. She was going through the motions. After briefly identifying as bisexual, Ryan reluctantly adopted a label of lesbian. “The word lesbian just leaves a bitter taste, but I know that’s what I am.”

Not a Lesbian...

She was “madly in love with” her best friend at the age of 13, but Ryan was not a lesbian. Her understanding of the term lesbian did not connect with her feelings at the time. Monopolized by thoughts of her friend, she knew nothing of same sex relationships, and a label of straight was the only option —so she settled for a close friendship. However, it did not take long for this to change.

“I grew up in the church.” Heavily involved with her church from a young age, and still identifying as a practicing Christian, Ryan was raised with religion firmly integrated into her everyday life – a religion and religious community that condemned same-sex relationships.

... there was a little period of my life, let’s say late adolescence, that I felt a little disconnected from church because I felt, realized that my identity was a lesbian and I just felt that it was not a space that was welcoming.

However, at 15 years old, Ryan met Morgan, a 23-year-old woman from her church choir. Morgan had dated women before, and became the only role model for same sex relationships that Ryan had ever encountered. The two quickly connected and secretly began a tumultuous, on-and-off relationship that would last the better part of the next 15 years. Ryan laughed, “I remember asking her, ‘so does this make you my boyfriend?’ So I had established that she was my boyfriend, she’s just a woman.” Ryan understood gender roles to be black and white at the time. Two members of a romantic relationship were either the boyfriend or the girlfriend, and two women had never been together before. “In my mind, I was in a relationship with Morgan, but she was my

boyfriend, because girlfriends... two women can't be in a relationship. So, I swore that she and I were the only two; we just made it up." Ryan still identified as straight, lacking the language to describe her relationship with Morgan, and instead fit her relationship with Morgan into her existing language.

Ryan's mother, a sweet, generous woman with a fierce exterior, quickly suspected the relationship between Ryan and Morgan, and forbade it. This was not the first time that Ryan had let her mother down. As a child, Ryan struggled academically, and her poor marks were met with physical discipline. Ryan was an only child and, despite the "physical abuse" she experienced at her mother's hand, placed her mom on a pedestal. Their relationship was important to Ryan, and continues to be – disappointing her mother was the last thing Ryan wanted. This would come to conflict with the expression of her sexual identity.

Desperate for a fresh start well before she met Morgan, Ryan had convinced her mother to allow her to move to the U.S. to live with extended family in an urban area close to New York City. There, she would be able to pursue her education with a clean slate. Since these plans were already in motion, Ryan did not have to maintain her relationship with Morgan under her mother's watchful eye for long. Within months of their relationship beginning, Ryan moved to the U.S.

Ryan and Morgan continued their relationship as long-distance. Though her understanding of sexual identity and options for expression were growing exponentially, based on her exposure to queer culture in the U.S., Ryan was in no rush to relabel herself. Morgan broke up with Ryan, the first time, during her freshman year of college. This

breakup uprooted Ryan's world. Morgan was not only her partner, but her role model for her sexual identity, and this was the only relationship she had ever been in. Devastated by the breakup, Ryan slipped into a depression. At 18 years old, only recently beginning to broaden her understanding of LGBTQ culture, Ryan understood Morgan as the exception – the only woman she would ever be with. “It was like ok, um well, she is the only person, only woman I could ever be with, so obviously I need to go back to guys. I just can't be with another woman.” With this, Ryan noted that she had never been with men sexually, so the idea of going “back to guys” could be interpreted as Ryan pursuing the sexual identity that was expected of her, as opposed to returning to old habits. Nonetheless, Ryan maintained her “straight” label.

“I tried to hook up with guys; just couldn't do it.” Upon trying on this identity and attempting to form intimate relationships with men, Ryan started to believe that Morgan may have not been an anomaly after all —perhaps she could be with a woman besides Morgan. Looking back, Ryan expressed a general disconnect with all men throughout her life. “My general impression of guys, I just have to say... they are just kind of void of emotion, at least the type of depth that I would need.” She was able to identify a personal perspective of men that did not include the emotional depth that she believes she requires for an intimate relationship, and, anecdotally, added that she found them to be “gross.” She also acknowledged a connection between how she sees men and her relationship with her father, who never opened up to her enough to build a substantive relationship.

With this new perspective of her sexual identity including women besides Morgan, Ryan shed her “straight” label and adopted a label of “bisexual.” She had

recently come to know this word. Bisexual was “something I learned in college, I heard the word... watched *Queer as Folk*.” Retrospectively, she acknowledged that her use of “bisexual” was always uncomfortable. “My friends in college teased me. They were like ‘Ryan, you’re not bisexual, you’re a lesbian. And I pushed back and I was like ‘f*** ya’ll, I’m bi.’” Ryan knew that she was only attracted to

women, that’s it. Guys are cute, I love to look at... I look at men and I’m like ‘your style is on point,’ and I definitely love attractive people. I don’t care what sex or gender... but in terms of sexual or romantic, guys just don’t do it for me. I can’t.

However, she maintained the bisexual label for some time.

This label gave her the flexibility of being with women without using the “lesbian” label, to which she had attached so much stigma. She just did not see herself as a lesbian, based on the definition that she had always known and internalized, and still had an understanding that a woman should be with a man. “Bisexual” kept her doors open. Knowing that she had feelings for women, but still clinging to the idea that she should be with a man, bisexual allowed for flexibility in her identity. Ryan struggled to shake her original knowledge of labels and sexual identities—an understanding that romantic and sexual relationships must consist of a man and a woman. Identifying as bisexual allowed her to hold on to that understanding; to the idea that she still might fit into it. Though her college friends, her audience at the time, supported her potential identity as a lesbian, she still felt disconnected from the term. The support from her audience was no match for her bias against the term “lesbian.”

In time, Ryan's understanding of the term lesbian began to change, and her internal bias began to soften. Having been in the U.S. for a few years at this point, Ryan had been consuming queer media – *Queer as Folk*, *The L Word* – and noticed more gay people, more lesbians. While she had a supportive group of friends in college, they were not gay, and she was lonely. Through slowly increased exposure to queer culture, and connecting with others like her, both in person and via MySpace, Ryan waded into her current label. She was finally seeing people that she could identify with, who identified as gay or lesbian. Suddenly, “a lesbian is not a woman who wishes she was a man or a boy.” The stereotypes were breaking down. *The L Word* helped her to understand that options beyond a “man john” existed. Though she names her primary identity as a black woman, her racial identity seemed insignificant when she first discovered queer media —deeply connecting with the characters based solely on their sexual identity. “In retrospect, to know that the cast [of *Queer as Folk*] was all white, and I'm a black woman, but the race thing did not even matter. It was like ‘wow, they're two women in a relationship with possibly a family.’”

She reflected on the impact of *Queer as Folk* and *The L Word* as being “huge” for her. They breathed life into her knowledge of labels and identities, and shifted her worldview. Suddenly, “you could be successful, and professional, and beautiful, and femme, or not femme, or in between, or whatever... *The L Word* made the l word okay.”

... but a Lesbian...

Beginning in her junior year of college, Ryan dove into her lesbian identity. Highlighting her knowledge of sexual identity development, Ryan referenced Cass's

(1979) Identity Pride stage as strongly resonating for her; she was “rainbowed out.” She shared a trinket that she has held on to for over ten years, as a memory of this time in her life. It was a rainbow necklace that she had bought during her first trip to NYC Pride; the first rainbow item she ever purchased (Figure 6).



Figure 6. Rainbow necklace.

Prior to accepting and adopting her lesbian label, Ryan spent time reflecting on what was important to her.

I went to Catholic college and eventually I reconnected with my faith, which, funny enough, was the reason why I eventually accepted my sexual orientation, because I just decided to practice my religion and my faith on my terms. There was also a nun at the college that was very affirming, so that really helped me.

Upon her breakup with Morgan during her freshman year of college, Ryan found solace through involvement with Campus Ministry on the campus of her Catholic college. She was unsure of her sexual identity, but her faith was unwavering. Though just a hobby at first, Ryan eventually poured herself into the club. She engaged in prayer and soul searching, and attended retreats, conferences, and trips with the group—all bringing her closer to the church and deeper in her faith. Her faith filled the void left by the end of

her relationship with Morgan, and she opened herself to significant spiritual growth. Having attended a pilgrimage to France that she identified as spiritually significant, Ryan shared a memento from the trip. Upon its completion, each participant received a shoelace (Figure 7), intended to signify spiritual growth.



Figure 7. Green shoelace.

Associating this time with the alignment of two of her most significant identities, Ryan has kept this artifact close to her for almost 15 years.

Ryan's experience with religion at home, in the Caribbean, was enough to keep her closeted in Campus Ministry at first. However, with time, her religious leaders helped her to feel safe, and she disclosed her identity—ultimately being met with support, specifically from a nun and Priest on campus. Finally, her faith and her sexual identity could co-exist and be accepted by representatives of the church. Having provided the tools to help Ryan negotiate a relationship between her spiritual and her sexual identities, the support offered through this new audience, her spiritual community, was critical to the development of Ryan's sexual identity.

Ryan's perception of religion grew from an understanding of formal religion based on local manifestations of doctrine toward a personal faith that emphasized "soul

searching.” She shared a tattoo on her wrist (Figure 8) that was inspired by both her first relationship and her religion.



Figure 8. Tattoo of VERITAS.

“VERITAS,” Latin for “truth,” was the governing principle of her undergraduate institution. The ongoing search for truth symbolized the growth that she had experienced throughout college from both religion and her off-and-on relationship with Morgan, as well as her commitment to pursue and live out her own truth.

During her junior year of college, Ryan’s identity as a lesbian was her priority, but she described a lack of access to gay or lesbian friends in college. Feeling lonely and desperate for community around this identity, Ryan used social media to connect with other gay women. Connecting with a few gay friends through Myspace, Ryan began to network within the community to meet others with whom she could connect. She sought out a community for herself—other women that she saw herself in, and a community where she could comfortably explore her identity. Soon, she “had a nice little clique,” and was immersed “into the social scene, and that cemented everything.” Ryan joked that her identity development was shaped by “campus ministry and Myspace;” she felt like the label of “lesbian” finally fit. She proceeded to share that after the time she spent with this ‘clique’ in college and graduate school, they “all went separate ways... they served that purpose” in her life.

As she worked to negotiate how her lesbian identity fit, and still today, fits into her life, Ryan specifically noted the impact of seeing other lesbians of color, referencing television characters and following “queer couples of color” on Instagram. The use of social media has helped to not only normalize her lesbian identity by seeing powerful, famous, black lesbians just living normal lives, but to strategically and carefully out herself. Taking advantage of the platform provided by Facebook and Instagram, Ryan exposes specific parts of her life to a controlled audience and is able to gauge acceptance and support from people in her life based on their responses to her posts. Learning of the support of people in her life has helped her to settle into her lesbian label and identity, and to begin to live her life more openly.

... but not a Lesbian

However, while she identifies as a lesbian, Ryan does not feel strongly attached to this label. Adopting a label of lesbian did not completely erase the stigma that Ryan attached to it.

Until this day, the word lesbian, to me, has such a stigma sometimes that I did, and I still do sometimes find myself a little ‘ehh, I don’t know if I want to use the word,’ especially when I go back home to [the Caribbean]. The word lesbian just leaves a bitter taste, but I know that’s what I am. I have an easier time using it here in the United States, so context, I think, plays a really huge role in my labels. Actually, when I go home, I don’t even talk about my sexual orientation, so I’m more out here than I am at home.

Her exposure to queer culture and knowledge of labels and identities in the U.S. helped to break down the bias that Ryan had carried with her from her Caribbean culture, but only when she is in the U.S. As previously mentioned, Ryan had no understanding of female same sex relationships prior to moving to the U.S. The stigma that she carried with her around same sex relationships was mostly based on her island's attitude toward gay men, or "anti-men" as they were called. This stigma had brought her to think of being gay as a defect; that you were worthless if you were not straight. While she moves in varying cultural circles, in the U.S. and the Caribbean, the latter still holds a significant amount of weight in terms of how she sees the language she uses to name her sexual identity.

Ryan admits that the only labels she knew when adopting her lesbian label were "lesbian, bisexual, heterosexual," and that she "didn't know about anything else until" she started her doctoral program. She suggested that she might have selected a different label if she had known them at the time. Acknowledging the disconnect with her current label, she has entertained the idea of a few other labeling options, particularly queer and same-gender-loving. These labels appeal to her based on their perceived fluidity and distance from the stigma associated with both *gay* and *lesbian* that she carries with her.

Having once seen labels more rigidly, Ryan identifies a personal bias against individuals who may see themselves as sexually fluid, but firmly identify with a monosexual label once they enter into a long-term relationship.

I have nothing against bisexuals... I know there's a huge stigma with bisexuality, I even find myself somewhat empathetic, not empathetic, but I'm empathetic

toward the bisexual community and how much they're misunderstood, but I'm less vicious against bisexuals than I am against lesbians who deny their lesbian identity after dating a man, it really hurts my soul.

As previously discussed, Ryan has no attraction to men at the time, but there is a permanence that comes with a strictly monosexual label such as lesbian – ruling out the option of being with men down the road if her feelings should change.

“I find that I use ‘queer’ when I am with other queer people who identify as ‘queer’” or “I might use gay... with people who identify as gay, or other lesbians who aren’t cool with that term, I would say gay.” When considering the idea of relabeling herself, Ryan shared that she is comfortable using other terms, but does not always want to. “I want to be okay with lesbian... it’s about time that I got... you know, that stigma has to go away.”

Two Different People

Context has a tremendous impact on the expression of Ryan’s sexual identity. “I look at myself kind of like two different people.” From country to country, role to role, audience to audience, Ryan evaluates the nature of her relevant identities and the privilege or bias that may be associated with each identity in a particular context. Her focus has been not only on how she labels herself, but on how she lets others know who she is. She carefully and constantly chooses where and when to disclose her sexual identity and/or label based on perceived safety and support, and associated implications from context to context.

She articulated the struggle as having to do with the reason for her coming out to a specific audience. Is it necessary information for them? As she described her envy of people who are fully out, she conveyed that she just does not feel safe enough to be open in every environment, “I don’t feel like I’m at a point in my life where I’m safe. I have pockets of safety, but I don’t feel like, across the board, that I can just be this person.”

“I can say what it would feel like: relief, not always having to negotiate, not always having to think and rethink and rethink and rethink. I’m always thinking about ‘what is this person’s impression of me right now.’” For Ryan, selective outness is both a stopping point and a semi-permanent solution. In certain contexts, through evaluation of privilege and bias, she has determined that not disclosing her identity is the safest choice, and she maintains separate lives, hiding her queer identity to allow her more relevant identities to gain the most uninhibited privilege. In other contexts, she uses selective outness to ease into how she will ultimately navigate her identity in that specific social location.

Person #1. The differences between Ryan’s U.S. home and her Caribbean home span more than the weather. As suggested earlier, the island on which Ryan was raised could be described as conservative. She was brought up in an upper middle class, tight knit, suburban island town, with strong ties to the Caribbean Christian Church. Between the homophobic nature of the Church, and the culture overall, the stigma attached to identifying as a lesbian, or presenting with less than feminine gender expression when in her country of origin, generally keeps Ryan in the closet during her visits home. Having been called a man john by her Great Aunt only three or four years ago, Ryan now makes

an effort to present in such a way that does not call attention to her sexual or gender identities.

“I’m very feminine when I go back home... I don’t really talk about my sexual orientation when I’m home. My closest friends know, and I find that I might use the word gay.” Ryan cannot articulate a difference between the terms lesbian and gay for herself. She only tied her preference for “gay” at home to the stigma around the term “lesbian,” and suggested that the term “gay” was not used to refer to women in her culture, only for men – so it was safer. “It’s really amazing how the second I go home, it’s like the word lesbian just becomes such a burden that I want to shut myself from it.”

It was the word “lesbian” that Ryan distanced herself from. The identity that it represented for her, specifically, was less of an issue. Not only did her close friends know, but Ryan had just come out to her mother over Christmas dinner, less than two months before our first interview. Ryan reflected on when things began to change with her mother. She recalled that it was sometime around 2010, approximately seven years ago, that queer representation on television began to shift her mother’s perspective and understanding of LGBTQ folk. It began to be normalized, but not enough for Ryan to come out until her current relationship. At the start of a new relationship, Ryan felt guilty constantly referring to her girlfriend, Becky, as her friend. Not only did the hetero-washing of their relationship hurt Becky, but Ryan felt that Becky was too important, too significant to hide.

Spending Christmas together as they usually do, Ryan finally told her mother that Becky was her girlfriend. “I started apologizing. I said ‘I’m so sorry, I know you’re

probably so disappointed in me, no mother wants to hear this...' She was like 'you have nothing to apologize for. To each his own.'" After thirty-three years of pretending and hiding, a weight was lifted. "We went on to have a great vacation... almost like I never said anything that was bad."

While Ryan described the exchange, expressing her excitement and optimism, her language betrayed her. "Almost like I never said *anything that was bad*." Ryan still sees her sexual identity, label aside, as being wrong. In a subsequent interview, she made this clear: "I still feel like being gay is a defect. I'm still working through that. I still see it as it's the one thing I did wrong."

Her identity and expression in the Caribbean are baggage, weighing her down. The stereotypes, the expectations, the stigma—all overwhelming to Ryan. The identities that are most important to her when she visits—family member, friend—are unrelated to her sexual identity. It is not necessary information for them.

Person #2. While Ryan admits to being "more out here than" when she is at home, "more out" is relative. In her everyday life in the U.S., Ryan finds herself in a number of social locations, holding a variety of identities on a regular rotation. Her roles include being a doctoral student, member of a relationship, teacher, and a school counselor. Each role carries its own context and assumptions to which Ryan reacts.

Her role as a doctoral student is multifaceted. Connecting her with other roles such as teacher and girlfriend, this is a significant part of her life. With a focused research agenda on queer issues, and a visible queer community within both the University and the program, Ryan tends toward being out in her doctoral program.

Not only is she out in her program, it is where she met her current friend group, as well as her girlfriend. Six months before our first interview, Ryan and Becky met as students in the same doctoral program, and quickly felt a connection to one another. Becky had never dated a woman before Ryan, but she has always been honest about their relationship. Ryan was glowing as she spoke of Becky, “her development has just rocked me because she, the second we got together, the second we kissed, she told her family.” Becky’s comfort and openness with her sexual identity and their relationship is something new for Ryan. Before this relationship, Ryan had only known what it was to be with Morgan—a secret, tumultuous, long-distance relationship. “There’s this pride that she had about me that I had never had before in my previous relationship.” Finally having a girlfriend that is part of her everyday life, Ryan’s sexual identity was becoming increasingly integrated into her life as well.

Things moved quickly between Ryan and Becky. Before our final interview, they had exchanged promise rings and moved into a new apartment together. Though facing new challenges that come with cohabitation, Ryan was excited about their future. She was happy, and she was sure. However, they exercised discretion when it came to sharing this news with their friends, mostly fellow students in their doctoral program. Concerned that their friends may judge their relationship as moving too fast, they kept the information to themselves for some time. It is important to note that, while this is an example of selective outness, it is unrelated to Ryan’s sexual identity, but more so to her perception of social norms as they relate to dating.

As she trains to be an instructor at the large, liberal university at which she is pursuing her degree, Ryan has experienced inconsistency when coming out to her students. Sometimes, it comes easily to her, naturally folding into the content or conversation of the course. On other occasions, she struggles to articulate her identity to her students. “I can’t f***ing figure out why I cannot, why it’s such a thing for me to come out” in particular classes. She has asked herself if it has to do with the people in the classroom, or the content in the course. The struggle wears on her, without realizing that she has already answered her own question. Her trouble with coming out to a specific audience may be related to her previous idea that her decision to share her sexual identity is based on her question of whether or not it is necessary information for her audience. When she finds it to be relevant to her identity as an educator, she shares it.

Ryan has worked hard to mold the challenges from her childhood into a career. As a school counselor, she enjoys the opportunity to be a resource to students that she did not have when she was an adolescent, but Ryan is troubled by the restraints that she faces in her workplace. “Psychologically unsafe,” Ryan described a hostile, oppressive work environment, at which she is confronted with heterosexism, racism, and ageism on a regular basis. Ryan reads the school as having sent a clear message:

I’d always ask to do professional development workshops with the school counselors in my department. Especially now with trans kids, and I keep getting pushed aside. They don’t want it, and I’ve asked to do a safe space training program and was like ‘you don’t have to pay me I’ll do everything myself,’ they don’t think it’s important.

Her expertise and experience are unwanted and unappreciated until her colleagues need support for an LGBTQ student —and not a moment sooner.

Ryan connects the disrespect related to her skills and what she has to offer with her identity as a black woman. “It’s something that the three black people in the department, we’ve all experienced.” Already feeling oppressed based on her racial identity, Ryan is selectively out at work. She expressed that she would likely be more comfortable coming out if she was white, and believes that adding “lesbian” to “black” would worsen her work environment. Even in relationships that validate her racial identity, such as with an older black woman with whom she works, Ryan hesitates to disclose her sexual identity based on a fear of “disappointing” the woman, who is also an ordained minister. Revisiting the importance of context in Ryan’s life, she identifies the strongest part of her identity as being a black woman —but only since moving to the U.S.

“I can’t hide it... when I moved to the U.S., my race became salient.” Prior to her move to the U.S., her race placed her in the majority on the Caribbean island on which she was raised. When in that context, “home,” as she refers to it, her sexual identity is paramount and her identity as a black woman fades into the background. This idea of the salience of identities shifting, so greatly, from context to context, draws the timing of Ryan’s shifts into focus. Upon moving to the U.S., her minority identity (lesbian) was affirmed, while her majority identity (black) was rejected.

Across *social* locations. Ryan’s description of a hostile work environment and explicit homophobia in the Caribbean explain why she has chosen to keep parts of herself private. However, the recent changes in her life suggest that her two different personas

may be closer to merging than she expects. After coming out to her mother and beginning a new life with Becky, Ryan was moving toward integration of her identities. Her selective outness, based on perceived lack of safety, and/or her motivation toward optimizing her privilege when fearing multiple layers of oppression, may never go away. Though her expression and transparency may be restricted in those contexts, that is where their influence stops.

Ryan's use of social media is helping her to cross boundaries that she may not have known how to approach in the past. With the comfort that she has started to experience in her new relationship, Ryan has started to share her life more openly through social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram. This decision has been met with support across Ryan's communities.

I've noticed that like when I post pictures of me, of like the two of us, me and Becky, that like people at home are like 'yeah,' and like, might just say, like 'really cute,' you know, like something nice. And so, that has helped me to be more at ease.

While she does not openly discuss her sexual identity at home... yet... the opportunity to express herself on social media allows her to implicitly out herself to people outside of her circle of close friends —people that she may not have disclosed to before. The support that she has received from these individuals has helped her to be more comfortable with her identity in a context that was once very threatening. Social media has helped her to safely share controlled pieces of her life with friends, family, and

acquaintances, offering more of herself with each post, and blurring the line between these two different people.

Paying it Forward

Since moving to the U.S. almost twenty years ago, Ryan has taken the struggles that have molded her throughout her life, and turned them into something new. Her choices as an adult, were not solely based on interest, but on how she can use her experience to help others. Ryan's life is one of activism.

Starting the Gay/Straight Alliance (GSA) at her Catholic undergraduate institution was the first of many choices Ryan has made to better the circumstances of others. Queer life, particularly *organized* queer life, was not extraordinarily welcomed on the religious campus – and Ryan felt passionately about changing that. Reflecting on a campaign that she was involved with, geared toward visibility on campus, she shared a t-shirt (Figure 9) from her college years that was offered to faculty and staff that were supportive of LGBTQ individuals —it read “gay? fine by me.”



Figure 9. "Gay? Fine by me." t-shirt

The fact that she was leading this crusade made sense, based on Ryan's location in her sexual identity development. Her sexual identity was her whole world at this point. However, there was more to this. Her identity as an activist began to gain traction.

Motivated by both her struggles with her sexual identity and academics, Ryan made the choice to pursue a career as a school counselor. Armed with the belief that her life would have been easier if there were support services in the Caribbean schools she attended, she committed to helping others in ways that she could have used help as an adolescent. She uses her professional role as a platform for advocacy, providing a safe place for queer students who may otherwise not have one.

Passionately driven to find new ways of helping others, and motivated toward success based on the physical abuse she endured at the hand of her mother when she would fail as a child, Ryan enrolled in a doctoral program. Her research and teaching interests focus on sexual identity development. It drives her professional perspective, but does not always align with her personal perspective. Ryan struggles to negotiate the facts with her biases. In a way, her choice to pursue queer work as a profession is helping her to navigate her feelings about her own identity, as much as it will help others to navigate their own.

Final Thoughts

When faced with the suggestion that her life seems to be heading in a good direction, Ryan responded: "I still feel like being gay is a defect. I'm still working through that. I still see it as it's the one thing I did wrong. But I'm getting a doctorate and I'm doing well, but I still feel like I still need to work through that it's not a flaw... I still

look at it as the one thing I did wrong, but it's okay because I did everything else right.”

Ryan is becoming more comfortable with her sexual identity and how it fits into her various contexts. She is not ashamed of who she is, but is realistic. Not only is she aware of her multiple minority statuses, but her position affords her perspective. She knows, in a way that others may only imagine, how drastically context can influence life. This knowledge fuels her work toward protecting the life she has built.

“Ace”

The attorney. The daughter. The fiancé. After some rescheduling, Ace and I agreed that the best way to have our first meeting was via Facetime. I had been settled in my home office for some time; the hour approached 9:00 p.m. on Thursday evening when Ace called me from her future in-laws' house, where she lives with her fiancé. Wearing a grey zip up hoodie and dark, thick-framed glasses, she explained that she had just settled in from work, as is her schedule on most nights. She had dark hair that fell just below her shoulders, fair skin, and brown eyes.

Ace and I had scheduled and canceled our first meeting more than once at this point. An immigration attorney, passionate about her work and in the height of the recently inaugurated President's travel ban, she was juggling long hours and unexpected challenges —90 minutes with me was 90 billable minutes not spent elsewhere. She explained that, for her, the executive orders are a reality and the implications are overwhelming. Ace was an immigrant herself, having been born in the same small, coastal town on the northwest shore of Spain as her parents. As such, the current political state hits home for her, and work is her priority right now.

Putting in 12-hour days in her Manhattan office from Monday through Saturday, she often does not get home until eight, nine, or ten in the evening. While she finds the work to be fulfilling most of the time, and believes it is important to be helping people in this way, she notes that she and her fiancé are both attorneys, and the long hours hinder their work/life balance, causing her to struggle with focusing on where she wants to be — with her family.

Ace is currently engaged to Grey, her girlfriend of over three years. When they first met, in 2012 during their first year of law school, Grey was dating a different woman, and Ace was dating a man. Though she currently identifies as “gay,” this label is relatively new for her.

When I was younger than 14, I thought I was straight... and then when I was 14, in 2004, that's when I fell in love with my first, at the time, girlfriend, but I didn't think I was gay. I thought I was more bisexual because I was physically attracted to men as well, so it's really hard to understand at 14 years old what it is. So it really wasn't until 2014, when I was 24 and met my current partner that I kind of correlated spending my life with a woman, with being gay, and not being emotionally connected with men.

Her initial description of her journey from straight to gay offered a simple, intellectual assessment of how she moved from label to label. Unfortunately, her lived experience was anything but.

Bisexual because...

During the period of time when she identified as bisexual, Ace dated few people exclusively, but had many more experiences with men than women, estimating a ratio of nine to one.

A lot of it was in Spain in the summers, because it's Spain and everyone's drunk and all my friends were straight so they would all have guys around them all the time. So, I would just hook up with their friends, and I didn't have to have a serious boyfriend, so it was fun in the moment. I don't look at it as a bad time or anything, but I never had a serious boyfriend other than the boyfriend I just had at 24 years old. But, then in contrast, all the girls I've been with were all my girlfriends, and I'd never hooked up with just a random girl, which I never thought of.

As she spoke, she started to put pieces together. The fact that she would only "hook up" with men but always wanted more from women was not obvious to her at the time, but suddenly made sense.

... of high school. Prior to starting high school in 2004, Ace attended Catholic school, her mother was a stay-at-home-mom, and she identified as straight. With her mom returning to work as she started in a new, public school, it seemed as if everything was changing. Ace had explained her choice to identify as bisexual being based on both physical and emotional attractions to women, while retaining a physical attraction to men, but scarcely gave herself credit for the developmental expedition that she spent almost a third of her life navigating.

Ace met Emily during her freshman year of high school, in Biology class. “I fell in love with her immediately, and I didn’t understand what that meant.” Emily identified as bisexual. “Bisexual was huge in high school. Everyone was bisexual. Everyone I dated was bisexual, it just came out all the time. I didn’t really hear gay or lesbian or anything. It was just bisexual.” Still feeling some physical attraction to men, and having little knowledge of possibilities at the time, or of anyone adopting monosexual identities besides heterosexual, bisexual was a logical choice for Ace—in her social world.

... of family. Life at home was a different story. Ace and her brother were raised by their parents in a town that was just across the Hudson River from New York City. “Typical immigrants,” as she described them, Ace’s family came from a collectivist culture, and their priorities were their family and annual trips back to Spain. Ace shared a photograph of her town in Spain, taken by her uncle, to offer a glimpse into this important piece of her life.



Figure 10. Photograph from Spain.

Throughout her childhood, Ace identified strongly with her Spanish heritage. She described the role of her Latino identity as “very strong. I’m from Spain... my parents barely speak English... I was raised in a very Spanish household. I wasn’t Americanized.” And she did not want to be. She wanted to live in Spain, and spend her

nights partying on the beaches with her family. However, as she grew older, Ace realized that Americans have so many opportunities that others do not have. She wished that her parents had embraced American culture, believing that being “Americanized” would have tempered the feelings of depression and worthlessness that her parents felt, would have helped her family to be able to talk through their challenges, and would have allowed her to be more independent. Her life would have been better.

Ace’s mother was a stay-at-home mom until Ace entered high school, and her father, the breadwinner of the family, worked in construction. Ace went on to describe him as a “caveman,” clinging to his heritage, and rejecting her LGBTQ identity. “He’d rather me be dead than be gay. He wishes I took drugs instead,” said Ace, despondently, compared to a time when she was “daddy’s little girl.”

With traditional values, the family’s perception of social issues, and most other things, were imposed by Ace’s father. For most of her childhood, this was not an issue. If Ace and her brother did their homework and were involved in extra-curricular activities, her parents were happy. They spent most of their free time together, with a handful of social relationships with other families from their region in Spain. Ace described her younger years fondly, sharing a photo of her family dressed in their holiday clothes, sitting on a cream-colored leather couch in front of a large Christmas tree. Her father sat in the middle with her brother to his left, and her mother to his right, with Ace sitting on her mother’s lap. “We were so close, and now we’re so distant. It’s just hard.”

A significant presence in her life, Ace’s parents eventually became suspicious of her dating habits in high school. After some investigation, including reading her text

messages, Ace's parents discovered that she was dating a woman, and she was forced out of the closet. Having no LGBTQ role models or presence in their lives up to this point, aside from her mother's affinity for Ricky Martin and one gay girl known as "Gay Maria" from their home town in Spain, Ace had no idea how they were going to react. "They didn't have anyone showing them that this is normal, this is perfectly fine, there are no issues with this." Having already come out as bisexual to an older cousin from Spain via Myspace message, and being met with support, Ace had some hope. However, her hope was quickly replaced by despair. "Being gay is worse than being a drug addict; it's worse than being a murderer for them." They assumed she was going to "die alone with AIDS." "My dad fainted, and my mom literally was physically flipping out... he actually passed out on the floor where my mom was like 'call an ambulance...' it was so dramatic."

Ace was raised in the Catholic Church and ties many of her values, beliefs, customs, and memories back to her religion. She remembered attending mass daily, spending time as an altar server, and feeling strongly about her beliefs as a child. "My parents turned to the church to pray that I would not be gay anymore... they kind of used Catholicism against me." Telling her that she could not be both gay and Catholic, Ace's parents pushed her from the Church, to the point where this once important piece of her life is now "tainted."

A few weeks after they found out I was gay for the first time, my dad or my mom, one of them put a statue of baby Jesus on the table... and they made me swear in front of Jesus that I would stop being gay.

Her focus on her relationship with religion as she spoke highlighted what she has given up as she chose to pursue her sexual identity, having sacrificed the relationship with the Catholic Church that she had come to know, and the identity as a Catholic that she had come to identify so strongly with. Even after perceiving rejection from her religion, through the actions of her parents, she connects her values to her experience with religion and is still motivated to find a way to fit it into her life.

After learning about Ace's relationships with women, her parents became stricter with her, working to protect her from "the wrong crowd." Her home environment became physically and emotionally suppressive. She chose not to pursue involvement with the LGBTQ community out of fear that her parents would find out. While Ace was interested in meeting others like her, the pressure from her family to pursue opposite-sex relationships, and even a heterosexual identity, limited her options and outweighed her desire to become involved in the LGBTQ community. Her cultural expectations and parents' watchful eyes influenced Ace to place her attractions to women on the back burner, and try to have a "normal" life with a man.

During this time, Ace was living at home, commuting to a local college and working at a chiropractor's office. She tried to have relationships with men to make her parents happy, knowing inside that she would rather be with women. She was just not able to emotionally connect with men, but the stigma of a non-heterosexual identity that was imposed by her parents was so severe that she felt as if this was her only option. Ace was stuck. Her family was everything to her, and her identity as a daughter was the most significant part of her life. But she was denying a substantial piece of herself.

Often, I think of ‘should I just have lived the normal life and not been in love?’

But then I’m like, ‘alright, that’s the stupidest thing ever. Who doesn’t want to be in love?’ But it is something I’ve thought about, and my fiancée knows this, you know, because it’s hard. *I’ve lost everything.*

... **she had not met Grey yet.** After meeting the woman who would become her fiancée, everything changed. When Ace met Grey in 2012, she had been dating Mateo for almost a year. Ace described him as the perfect guy. As she reflected on her relationship with Mateo, Ace acknowledged that it may have made things with her family worse by getting their hopes up. He was sweet, traditional, good looking... and, most importantly (aside from his gender), from Spain. He picked her up for dates and paid for dinner, but she never saw him as more than a companion. However, she understood the stigma around being with a woman as being so unmanageable that she had no choice. “I thought I was going to marry a man and just cheat on him with women... until I met my fiancée, and then I said ‘I can’t do that.’”

It was her first class, on her first day of law school in New York City when she met Grey, an independent, American woman. Though Grey was also dating someone at the time, the two had chemistry that they could not ignore. But they fought it. Time passed. Grey took a break from law school to explore other options, but eventually returned... and was single. As their paths continued to cross throughout law school, Ace realized that this was the person that she was supposed to be with —and she could no longer imagine faking a life with a man. “The second she came back, and I saw her, I felt

like it was ok to be myself. I don't hate myself anymore for going against my parents... it kind of all happened instantly.”

Upon ending her relationship with Mateo, Ace was sure that she would no longer be dating men. She quickly grew close to her new girlfriend. She finally felt safe enough, and identified strongly enough in a relationship outside of her family, to turn away from her bisexual label and adopt a monosexual label. Looking back on it, she does not believe that she was ever truly bisexual, since she believes that someone who is bisexual is able to fall in love with both men and women, and she has never loved a man. She acknowledged that she had inaccurately labeled herself based on her context at the time, adding that identifying as bisexual was easier than committing to a monosexual label when it came to her parents. Understanding what building a relationship with Grey meant for her relationship with her family, Ace chose to sacrifice a life where everything besides her relationship was “perfect,” and to step into the unknown with Grey.

A Question of Competence

Ace had firmly identified with a monosexual identity for roughly three years at the time of the interviews, and was able to articulate a few reasons for her choice of language around the expression of her sexual identity. Though she currently identifies as gay, joking that “it’s easier to say ‘gay’ than ‘lesbian...’ it’s just three letters,” she has used the term lesbian in the past. She once found it to be a more powerful term. “[I would use it] when I was trying to stick up for myself against my parents.” As their active arguments tapered, she felt less of a need to use the term to advocate for herself, and began to notice a negative connotation around the term “lesbian.” Ace referenced a

perception that “saying ‘lesbian’ kind of came off as a joke... as a fad or a phase of hooking up with girls and getting over it.” She even recalled a conversation she had with a peer during law school, “I had told her I was a lesbian and she started laughing, and I was like ‘what’s so funny,’ and she just said ‘you’re just the first person I’ve met who’s said that they were a lesbian. I’ve never heard anyone say that they’re a lesbian.’”

As she spoke, one portion of her experience stuck out. In a committed relationship, planning a future, she was no longer spending her energy denying or suppressing her sexual identity. However, she was now faced with a new challenge.

My profession is a lot of, to be honest, white males in corporate America, and it's difficult to be a female, and be gay, and be Latina at the same time, so it's always been kind of difficult for me to just say it. I don't like telling everyone that I'm gay when I first meet them. I don't like it, I don't know, I don't want to bring any negativity to a person that would think that that's negative. Especially in my profession. I don't want my work to be taken lightly just because I'm gay.

An immigration lawyer, Ace perceived a bias against her sexual identity from her profession. With her identity as an attorney being one of her most salient identities, she worries that her sexual identity could affect the perceptions of her colleagues and clients. “I don't want them to think I'm incompetent to do my work because they don't accept my lifestyle.”

Fortunately, Ace is comfortable enough to be out in her office environment, noting that her boss's daughter is also gay. However, many of her clients are Hispanic, and Ace understands them to be “not as open to be accepting of the gay community.” To

protect herself and her work, she carefully navigates the disclosure of her sexual identity with clients, only disclosing her sexual identity when she believes it will strengthen their relationship.

However, for those in her professional world that she does share her identity with, Ace described her choice to identify as “gay” over “lesbian” as

two-fold. It’s kind of just easier to say than ‘lesbian,’ it just comes out easier for me, and two, I feel like there is some kind of negative connotation to saying ‘lesbian’ in my profession... I feel like when I say ‘lesbian,’ people don’t take me as seriously. I’ve said lesbian before and people kind of laugh it off as like I sleep with women every now and then but am going to marry a man. And I’m like ‘no.’

But I’m taken more seriously when I say gay.

Ace described a sexualized perception of the term lesbian, compared with a straightforward, objective perception of the term gay. She learned that using the term gay to describe her sexual identity in this context colored how people saw her – it afforded her a level of privilege and respect that a label of lesbian did not.

Family First. But Which Family?

Ace has always held her family as a priority, but as she began to build her own family, she was forced to choose *which* family would be the priority. Her brother had married a woman – their parents accepted her; integrated her into their family. However, Ace’s mom would not even say Grey’s name, so this was not an option for them. She felt as if she were being forced “to live two different lives.”

Ace was conflicted and heartbroken. Having shared photo after photo of her family —her parents, her brother and his wife, her fiancé, their puppy, her fiancé's family —there was no question that she loved each and every one of these people. It did not matter what they had gone through to this point. They all belonged in her life, but she was tormented by thoughts of how to make them fit.

The separate lives started immediately after she met Grey. When they were not in class together, Ace would gather up her law books to give her parents the impression that she was going to study, and sneak into New York City to see Grey. They maintained a secret relationship for almost eight months before Ace's mother, once again, grew suspicious. Following her, and scrutinizing her activity on social media, Ace's mom eventually confronted her about the nature of her relationship with Grey. No longer able to hide the relationship, and not willing to end it or put her needs aside any longer, Ace saw no other choice but to move out of her family home. Her identity as Grey's girlfriend had surpassed significance of her identity as part of her family of origin. This relationship was now her priority.

It all happened very quickly in the fall of 2014. Once she made the decision to go, it was as if her house was on fire. She grabbed her books, laptop, and baby blanket (Figure 11) —the necessities, as she saw them at the time —and left everything else.



Figure 11. Baby blanket.

Then I went to Old Navy and got the cheapest clothes possible. And to a liquor store... All I did in my life was spend time with my family. There was nothing above my family. So, it was a hard time, when I got into this serious relationship, of putting my fiance above my family.

Ace had made her choice, and moved into her girlfriend's childhood home, where Grey lived with her parents and sisters.

Her new challenge was navigating the new roles of the individuals in her life. Though she moved out of her parents' home, she still wanted to maintain a relationship with them. However, she was in the process of building a new life, as part of a new family. "They brought me in like I was one of them from the first day."

Feeling betrayed by Ace's choice to leave, her parents would only engage in intermittent, surface level conversations with her. They refused to acknowledge her relationship or meet her girlfriend. Even her brother, once her best friend, sided with her parents out of respect for the family.

My brother, he kind of tries to be Switzerland, but he's very bad at it. He thinks my parents are so hurt by it that I'm the asshole that hurt them by leaving abruptly. He thinks, they all think, but he as well thinks that I just don't care about being a part of the family, that I just care about my fiancé's family and I'm detaching myself, where he doesn't see that they are the ones that forced me out and that if they to continue to not accept my life and accept my fiancé, then I'm gonna continue to be separated from them.

Ace believes that the strongest part of her identity shifts between her two lives. When she is with her nuclear family, the strongest part of her identity is that she is gay. When she is not with them, it is that she is an attorney. The stigma attached to her identity when she is with her family is so strong, even if they refuse to talk about her relationship, that she understands the only part of her that matters to them is that she is with a woman. "That's the only thing that they think of. That's the only thing that they see. They just see a lesbian." In their eyes, being gay eclipses all her accomplishments.

Her mother occasionally reaches out to her, but her father never initiates contact. Ace desperately wants to share her life with her family, and to share her family and culture with her fiancé. However, the expectation of her culture is to respect her family – and that means not to question them; not to hurt their feelings. Talking back was being rebellious; voicing opinions was crazy. Ace could not fathom how she could broach this issue with them respectfully. In contrast, Grey, described as outspoken and confident, in not only her sexual identity, but all aspects of her life, struggled to understand the cultural issues surrounding Ace's family, and encouraged her to speak up for herself.

For instance, I haven't spoken to my parents in like two months right now because they don't call or text me first, so my fiancé always says why don't you just say 'mom, what the f***, do you not care what's happening, do you not care if I'm alive?' And I always say 'I can't do that out of respect, because it's like I don't want to make them feel bad or hurt them by what I'm saying because you don't talk back and we don't talk about feelings,' and it is the respect aspect, that's true. And then my fiancé who's American says 'that's not disrespectful it's just telling your parents how you feel,' but for us, you can't do that.

Ace adamantly refused to bring Grey to meet her parents or to force anything about their relationship upon them because she found it to be disrespectful toward her parents. It was not about the two halves of her life learning to coexist—it was about two halves of Ace learning to coexist.

Over the years, Ace grew to hate holidays. Her internal obligation to spend holidays with her nuclear family meant that she had to give in to them on those days. She would leave her home with her fiancé and future in-laws, and travel back to her childhood home to spend time with her family, and to pretend as if her fiancé did not exist.

When she was not forcing a relationship with her parents, Ace was living with a new family, 19 miles away, but a world apart. Grey's family, also a Catholic, traditional, blue collar family, took Ace in as their own. "I sit with her on the couch with my arm around her, and her parents are sitting next to me... It's not a thought process." They not only accepted her, but accepted her identity and her relationship with their daughter.

There are times where it's very frustrating for me and I get resentful... it's frustrating for me to see that I'm literally sitting... my fiancé is sitting on my lap on the couch and her parents are right there and there's nothing weird about it. And my parents can't even say my fiancé's name... I want to shake my parents. It's not like my in-laws doing it, it's that I see like two other parents that are very traditional Catholic parents, too, and grew up in an Italian household, and my parents cannot be like them. I wish that they were like them, or at least can say my fiancé's name.

Suddenly, a mother figure with traditional values loved her for every part of her. This, in combination with her fiancé's comfort with her own identity, meeting some of Grey's friends who were also gay, and the ability to passively share her life on social media with a positive response from the people in her life, helped to normalize the life that she was building. Ace was happy and comfortable in her new home, and began accepting herself in a new way.

The Spring of 2016 brought changes for the couple. With life as students wrapping up, Grey decided it was time to take the next step in their relationship and asked Ace to marry her (Figure 12).



Figure 12. Engagement rings.

As they began to plan the wedding, Ace's excitement about the engagement was tempered by the reality of how this event would both be impacted by and would impact her family. Reflecting on her brother's recent wedding, to which her fiancé was not even invited, she prepared for an uphill battle.

After telling her parents of the engagement, Ace came out to her extended family. A portion of her extended family conveyed support for Ace, and disappointment in how her parents have reacted to the "situation," believing that her father's strong beliefs against same-sex relationships are influencing her mother. However, many relatives passed judgment on her, and think she is "a bad kid," not due to her gay identity, but based on the rift that she has created within her family, insisting "it's not about you being gay, it's about the way you did it," referring to how Ace picked up and left.

They think I abandoned them, that I don't want to be a part of the family, that I hate them, that I just want to be a part of my fiancé's family... I tried to show them that that's not it, but you're not really ok with me being gay if you're not wanting to meet my fiancé and wanting to be a part of my regular life.

Any deviation from the culture, such as distancing yourself from your parents, is justification to be blacklisted within the family. In her culture, once blacklisted, no one can provide support for you without being blacklisted themselves. At this point, her parents had not met her fiancé, would not talk about her fiancé or wedding planning, and would not commit to attending the wedding, planned for the Summer of 2018.

When looking toward the future and building a family, Ace could not imagine maintaining this double life. Worried that the double-life makes it difficult for her to remain true to herself, she had started to prepare for what her life may ultimately look like if her family does not accept her fiancé and the family that they plan to build.

I don't want to bring children into this world with me having a double life... see my parents Christmas morning, and then spend Christmas with my kids that night, because I don't think I'll be able to take my kids there, you know what I mean? I also don't think my fiancé would like me taking my kids for a whole holiday by myself, and her not being there, of course. What mom would want that? So it's more so me thinking of my future, and thinking of how I'm going to do this now, and my future... I can't do this forever.

Ace's decision to place priority on her romantic relationship instead of her family cost her. She traded one relationship, in which she felt love and support, at the expense of the other relationship, in which she felt stifled and restricted. Even so, Ace has continued to appease her parents, spending the last three years creating two distinct lives, allowing her to maintain a role in her nuclear family while pursuing a life with her fiancé. Ace shared that the only time she has felt at peace in recent years was when her family and

her girlfriend (now fiancé) were both happy – even if it was a result of keeping those two aspects of her life completely separate from one another, omitting her sexual identity and label from her life with her parents.

A tipping of the scales. During our final interview, I was met with a much lighter, more optimistic version of the woman I had come to know during our previous interviews over the last five months. Something had shifted. Ace casually opened our conversation, “I guess the only thing that changed was my mother on board with the wedding.” This was monumental; hardly captured by her delivery.

My mother even mentioned the other day, she’s like ‘you know, the day you have kids, the day [your brother] has kids,’ that she’ll be here for us. So, I was like, ‘you know I’m having kids with a woman, right? ... I’m still having a kid with a woman and you still say you want to be here for the kid. Okay. That’s fine.

Ace could not pinpoint what had caused this change, but noted that her mother’s brother, her uncle, was recently and very unexpectedly diagnosed with lung cancer. She can only imagine that this has helped her mother realize her own mortality, causing a paradigm shift, and allowing her to see past the walls that had grown between them. Ace’s mother still had not met Grey, but there was suddenly hope and plans for it. Ace’s brother and sister-in-law were now able to be members of the wedding party, something that Ace and her brother had both wanted, but was never possible because of her brother’s loyalty to their parents. A weight had been lifted from her shoulders.

Final Thoughts

Ace did not describe a particular affection for her label. Though made with intent, it seemed to be a choice made out of obligation to both the people around her and society at large. She struggles with selective outness, but is taking steps toward integration of her identities. Overall, she struggled to acknowledge her own strengths and accomplishments. “I always feel like I need reassurance. ‘Am I doing the right thing, am I not? Should I pick this, should I not?’ I’m really indecisive.” She voiced discomfort around talking about herself, sharing that she usually only talks about her feelings when she is questioned, even in her personal relationships, and that she avoids confrontation at all costs. Qualities, undoubtedly, passed down from her parents.

Even when presented with the strength that it must have taken to make many of the choices she has made in her life, she sees herself as indecisive, functioning in a world of “should.” She does not see herself as independent or strong, particularly compared with her fiancé. She expressed a cathartic effect that came of our interviews, describing a weight being lifted off of her shoulders, and finally acknowledging the impact of her courage and bravery on her life.

Summary

Each woman who chose to participate in this study shared a unique, complex expression of her life. While there is no simple explanation for the choices individuals make, including the selection of a label, the intersections of our identities guide our decision-making processes. The themes discussed in this chapter, while not exhaustive, provide insight into the influences in a woman’s life that impact her selection of the

language used for verbal expression of her sexual identity, or her label. The common threads that run through the lives of each woman suggest that the selection of a label is not arbitrary, but is informed by the presence and salience of the whole of an individual's identities.

Chapter Five: Discussion

This study was designed to explore the experiences that influence non-heterosexual self-identified women in the selection of the current label for their sexual identity. In this chapter I will discuss interpretations of the findings in the context of the body of relevant literature, explore practical implications of the current study, articulate limitations of the study, and offer areas for future research along this line of inquiry. With a theoretical framework of intersectionality, the data collected in this study were analyzed with each participant's multiple statuses in mind (Sears, 2012). While each of the three women interviewed struggled to directly identify the process of selecting a label for their sexual identity when asked, they were able to articulate a variety of experiences associated with contextual variables that may contribute to the selection of their current label. These experiences, a result of intersecting statuses (Sears, 2012), discord between statuses (Few-Demo, 2014), and privilege associated with statuses (Sears, 2012), were woven together to generate a unique portrait of each participant.

Furthermore, when presented with a reflection of the content that they conveyed during our time together, the women often expressed a conflict between the *language* that they have selected to represent their sexual identity, and the *reality* or expression of their sexual identity. Even with the conflict, none of the women expressed a desire or plan to relabel themselves. Each woman's selected label means something to or serves a function for her—it represents something beyond the commonly understood academic definition. This supports Diamond's (2005) notion that the focus of a sexual identity label should be on what a label represents for an individual, and suggests that the labeling experience

should be understood in context of how a woman identifies herself to others, why, and at what point of time in her life.

Interpretation of Themes

Each participant was able to quickly identify the label that they use for their sexual identity. Gay or lesbian, for these women. When asked how they chose their label, each of them had simple responses: “I know that’s what I am,” “it’s just three letters,” “I have a vagina, so I’m a lesbian.” However, these reasons barely scraped the surface of their labeling experiences.

The portraits presented in Chapter Four offer an in-depth account and rich interpretation of each participant’s experience related to the selection of the current label for their sexual identity at the time that the study was conducted. Analysis of the data offered by the participants and presented in the portraits highlighted five interconnected themes that contribute to an individual’s selection of a label in any context at any point in time. These themes included the nature of their identities, salience of identities, knowledge and perception of labels, the label’s audience, and internalized bias or stigma.

These themes interact with the current body of literature in many ways. Primarily, as suggested by Diamond (2005), and supported by the study’s intersectional framework (Collins & Bilge, 2016; Crenshaw, 1991; Sears, 2012), an individual’s label is influenced by context. Diamond (2005) emphasized the importance of placing focus on the meaning behind an individual’s label —what it represents for them —as opposed to the socially constructed, commonly accepted definition of that label. The experiences in this study highlight this concept. The stories told by these women exemplify not only the fluidity in

sexual and romantic behavior, preferences, and expression for women in early adulthood, but the impact of context on the expression of that label or the associated identity to others.

Much of the existing research (Epstein et al., 2012; Korchmaros et al., 2013) focuses on what labels *do not* represent. However, this study begins to expose what they *do* represent. The portraits highlight the impact that context, or personal circumstances and social locations, associated with an individual's intersecting identities (e.g., race, ethnicity, religion, place of employment) can have on their labeling process. Each identity that an individual carries intersects with their other identities to create unique identities, manifesting distinctive combinations of oppression and privilege. When maintaining this intersectional lens, each decision made by each participant falls into place —fits into the tapestry of her life that has been woven by the push and pull of oppression and privilege carried by her identities from context to context.

For example, the label that Ryan primarily identifies with, lesbian, could represent the salience of her non-heterosexual identity in light of the stigma assigned to her label by her Caribbean heritage. However, the fact that her label changes, that she denies her non-heterosexual identity when at work, could represent the oppressive environment that she perceives from her colleagues as it relates to her racial identity. The findings of this study focus not only on how an individual understands her sexual identity, but how she communicates her identity to others, why, and when. Based on the lack of research in this area, the task of the current analysis is to bridge the existing literature, which provided

insight into the current research question and study's methodology, with the findings of the current study.

Nature of Their Identities

Of the variety of influences contributing to an individual's label selection, the nature of their identities is one of the most obvious. The nature of an individual's identities, including their perception and understanding of their interests, passions, feelings, and behaviors, and the intersections of those identities, build their perspective of the world around them. In support of Labeling Theory (Becker, 1963), behaviors can influence an individual's label, but did not prove to be indicative of that participant's labels.

Sexual identity. The nature of an individual's identities can and do change over time, but the development of an individual's *sexual* identity can be understood in light of the evolution of the related literature over the last 40 years. As previously discussed, commonly referenced models of sexually identity development (Cass, 1979; Fassinger & Miller, 1997; Milton & MacDonald, 1984; Troiden, 1989) have generally focused on the process that occurs between an individual initially questioning their heterosexual identity and finally fully establishing and integrating their sexual identity (or orientation, depending on the model) into their full identity. However, the findings of this study support the more recent literature that suggests a more fluid conceptualization of sexual identity and its evolution over time (Reynolds & Hanjorgiris, 2000), as well as the importance of emphasizing a perspective of intersectionality in all research (Few-Demo, 2014; McCall, 2005; Shields, 2008). The development of an individual's sexual identity

is a significant influence on their chosen label, as the trajectory of that development toward a heterosexual or non-heterosexual identity will directly suggest certain labels as options. However, while the nature of an individual's identity (e.g., heterosexual or non-heterosexual) may influence their label, it does not dictate an individual's label. This is highlighted by the study's findings suggesting that how an individual chooses and displays their label is contingent on the context.

Identities that are often associated with an individual's sexual identity must also be disaggregated, or separated into component parts, from the umbrella under which they usually fall. For example, romantic orientation, sexual attraction, gender expression, and sexual history. Korchmaros and colleagues (2013) refer to these types of identities as single-indicator measures of sexual identity, but they should be understood as distinct and freestanding. The current study supports the research (e.g., Blumstein & Schwartz, 1989; Igartua et al., 2009; Laumann, 1994; Rust, 1992) suggesting that labels do not necessarily represent the experiences of an individual over the course of their lives. For the participants in this study, though their currently selected monosexual labels correspond with their current relationship statuses, they are not consistent with the aforementioned identities, or single-indicator measures, for each woman—even in recent years. More specifically, the three participants shared experiences that would objectively categorize them differently than their selected label depending on the single-indicator measure used. For example, Tyler identifies as lesbian, but engaged in a romantic and sexual relationship with a man only two years ago, at which time she also identified as lesbian. In fact, unless each woman identified with and committed to a monosexual non-

heterosexual identity across all associated identities and/or experiences (e.g., romantic orientation; sexual attraction; gender expression; sexual history) prior to their first romantic or sexual experience, their current non-heterosexual identities would never represent their full experience as it relates to their sexual identity. This highlights the nature of expecting an individual's identity and/or associated label to be static—in direct opposition to human development, but not to stage development of sexual identity as suggested in the literature (Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1982; Troiden, 1988b).

Diamond (2005) suggested that individuals struggle to adopt a consistent sexual identity in the absence of consistent attractions to individuals with a specified gender identity. All three participants have only ever been romantically attracted to women, but each identified with a label of heterosexual or straight, then bisexual, prior to committing to their current label of gay or lesbian. It seemed that, for each of these women, the nature of their identity was never in question, but their preferred sexual behavior and deliberately selected language to express their sexual identity were inconsistent. The current study, consistent with Diamond (2005), suggests that individuals may struggle to adopt not only a consistent sexual identity, but also a *label*, in the absence of consistent attractions. The results build on Diamond's (2005) work, suggesting that the absence of a culture or audience of acceptance, or exposure to same-sex lifestyles and labels beyond their own may compound the struggle to adopt a consistent sexual identity or label, particularly in the cases of both Ryan and Ace.

The self-fulfilling prophecy discussed in the research (e.g., Becker, 1963; Rosario et al., 2006), suggesting that an individual's non-heterosexual label may influence them

to engage in congruent sexual behavior, did not seem to apply to the women in this study. In some ways, contrary to the existing research (e.g., Becker, 1963; Rosario et al., 2006), this study's findings suggest that an individual's behavior and expression influence their label, as opposed to their label influencing their behavior and expression. While the women shared that they engaged in various types of relationships with both men and women while they identified as bisexual, it seems as if they only carried the bisexual label to protect them from judgment in various contexts. They were not engaging in relationships with men in order to meet the expectations set forth by their label, as suggested by Rosario and colleagues (2006), rather to meet perceived expectations set forth by their context.

Tyler indicated that she identified as bisexual because she was not ready to say she was gay, while Ryan used the term bisexual after the breakup with her first girlfriend, thinking that she could never be with another woman, not psychologically connecting with the term lesbian, and believing that the logical choice was to pursue relationships with men if possible, and Ace clung to her bisexual identity because it allowed her parents to believe she may eventually end up with a man. The experience of each participant more closely aligned with the concept that a bisexual label can be transient (Rosario et al., 2006), allowing for a time of ambiguity prior to committing to a monosexual identity, regardless of the need for ambiguity. Upon affirmation of their monosexual identities through various paths, the women felt comfortable enough to commit to a label of gay or lesbian, not coinciding with a change in their behavior. Each

participant's behavior evolved naturally while they decided how to best navigate the reality of the nature of their identity in terms of selecting a label for themselves.

Constellation of identities. It is critical to consider not only the nature of an individual's sexual identity, but of all their identities and associated intersections, when conceptualizing the labeling process. The constellation of an individual's identities may hold identities that one may perceive as mutually supportive (e.g., gay, liberal, agnostic, educated, artistic, native to an urban area, child of gay parents), or those that could be perceived as wrought with conflict (e.g., gay, conservative, Catholic, Hispanic, native to a rural area, child of a religious leader). A focus on intersectionality, with particular attention to the power and privilege associated with various identities within and between contexts, provides a lens through which the relationships between identities can begin to be understood (Crenshaw, 1991; Few-Demo, 2014; Few-Demo et al., 2016; Greenwood, 2008; Shields, 2008). The nature of identities that are not genetic traits, including sexual identity, may and should be expected to change as individuals progress through developmental stages across their lifespan (Reynolds & Hanjorgiris, 2000), influencing one another in different ways over time.

Although the literature (e.g., Parks et al., 2004) suggested that the presence of multiple preexisting minority identities makes it easier for an individual to navigate additional minority identities, the experiences of both Ryan and Ace did not reflect this phenomenon. While the presence of preexisting minority identities had an impact on their development, their preexisting minority identities (Black and West Indian, and Latino, respectively) seemed to slow and/or inhibit the development of their sexual identities and

the associated labeling process. However, the experiences of both participants align with the notion that both family and religion are sources of support for individuals who identify with a racial and/or ethnic minority group (Fukuyama & Ferguson, 2000). Unfortunately, the nature of their preexisting minority identities, shared by their families of origin, conflicted with their additional minority identity—their non-heterosexual identity.

Salience of Identities

The salience of an individual's identities is tied closely to the influence of their nature, almost inseparably so. Each of us occupy identities that we may never think about, usually identities that place us in the majority. For individuals residing in the demographic region in which this study took place, the nature of some of those identities may be educated, able-bodied, White, English-speaking, male, middle-aged, heterosexual, or employed. We only consider these identities when they become minority identities, or their status is jeopardized. The concept of intersectionality informs the influence of the salience of an individual's identities by drawing attention to an individual's multiple statuses in context, power and privilege associated with those statuses, and how the statuses interact with one another (Kazyak, 2012; Murray et al., 2016; Nagel, 2000). An individual's intersections represent the whole of their identity, and their individual identities are inextricable from one another—none exist without the influence of the others. Varied contexts emphasize varied identities, or different parts of the self. It is critical to consider each of an individual's identities as they are situated

among one another, and which identities are most important to their existence within and between their social locations.

Presence of a specific identity, such as Catholic or Black, will not dictate an individual's label. However, the findings of this study suggest that it may influence an individual's choice of label to express her sexual identity in certain contexts when assessed in light of the identity's power and privilege when compared to the individual's circumstances in a specific social location, and the type of power or privilege they decide is most appropriate in that setting. For example, deciding that a heterosexual identity carried more power in the situation, Tyler chose to label her sexual identity as straight when communicating with parents of children that she was hired to care for. The salience of her identity as a caregiver was paramount, and the denial of her non-heterosexual identity in this situation did not impact her in any way that she perceived to be negative. Similarly, Ryan has chosen to express her sexual identity as heterosexual to most of her colleagues based on her experience of being oppressed in the environment based on her racial identity, and expecting a non-heterosexual identity to compound this oppression. The salience of her non-heterosexual identity in her place of employment is overshadowed by the salience of her identity as a school counselor. She believes that denying the nature of her sexual identity provides privilege in this context. Choosing to identify with a heterosexual label instead of sharing her non-heterosexual label, which she perceives would be met with an additional layer of oppression, allows her to focus on her work in the least restrictive environment possible, even if it requires her to

strategically compartmentalize her life and/or restrict the nature of her relationships with her colleagues.

Additionally, it is critical to consider how a woman's development contributes to her choices. As previously discussed, Gilligan (1982), the Womanist Identity Model (Helms, 1990; Ossana et al., 1992), and Brown and Gilligan (1993) suggest that relationships are integral to a woman's identity development – particularly in light of choices toward personal sacrifice. The importance of relationships through the lens of women's development informs the choices women may make regarding maintenance of relationships, even faced with personal sacrifice, such as in Ace's experience. Her development, along with many other influences, has made the cultivation and maintenance of relationships a priority for her. This drove her to persist when it came to finding a way to coexist between two opposing relationship priorities in her life.

The findings of this study suggest that the label that an individual selects in a particular context may represent perceived oppression in that context, or the individual's priorities regarding their roles or function in that context. If expression of a particular identity jeopardized relationships or other identities that the participants perceived to be more important than the power or privilege that they asserted along with their expression, they behaved accordingly (e.g., Ryan not coming out to her coworkers; Ace omitting her non-sexual identity in the presence of her family of origin). These individuals made choices in navigating their expression based on the salience of their identities, or how important their identities were in comparison to one another, from context to context.

Knowledge and Perception of Labels

The literature (e.g., Diamond, 2005; Floyd & Stein, 2002) suggests that society should depart from the current custom of assigning labels to sexual identity, and none of the three participants expressed any extraordinary pride in or specific articulation behind the selection of their current label. However, each woman had selected a specific label that they used to express their sexual identity. Among a variety of influences, the women discussed having an obligation, imposed by both the people around them and society at large, to select a label, and their selections were not made blindly. While each label carries a specific academic definition and certain contextual assumptions, and in support of the literature (Diamond, 2005; Epstein et al., 2012; Vrangalova & Savin-Williams, 2010), the experiences of the women who chose to participate in this study do not align with the associated expectations. The selected labels represent various pieces and perceptions of each woman, and serve a variety of purposes (e.g., safety or privilege) along the way.

While a variety of labels exist in the current literature (ALGBTIC LGBQQIA Competencies Taskforce, 2013), the participants of the current study seemed to have selected a label based on the options familiar to them, or their knowledge of labels, at the original time of the label's adoption. When prompted to consider it, the participants acknowledged, to varying degrees, that they may have chosen a different label if they were labeling themselves now. However, while none of the women expressed an interest in relabeling now that they have a broader understanding of labeling options, it is important to remember that their labels have already evolved as they developed over

time. Had I asked each of them, at the time during which they identified as bisexual, if they were interested in relabeling, I may have received the same response, only to learn that they would come to relabel in the future.

The ALGBTIC LGBQQIA Competencies Taskforce (2013) provides information regarding commonly used labels, offering definitions for bisexual, gay, heterosexual, homosexual, lesbian, queer, and questioning, but acknowledges that the list of labels is constantly growing and changing in meaning, and the use of language requires contextualization. At the time of initial labeling, Tyler indicated that it was either “straight or gay,” Ryan shared that the only labels she was aware of were “lesbian, bisexual, heterosexual,” and Ace recalled that she “didn’t really hear gay or lesbian or anything, it was just bisexual.” While it seems apparent that each of these women may have benefitted from a wider variety of commonly understood labeling options, the challenge around the language remains that the commonly used terminology continues to carry an assumption of consistency between label, preference, and behavior. This conundrum is emphasized by the fact that this issue has been cited in the literature for at least thirty years (e.g., Blumstein & Schwartz, 1989; Igartua et al., 2009; Laumann, 1994; Rust, 1992), and is supported by the current study.

As suggested by the existing literature (Diamond, 2003; Diamond & Wallen, 2011; Savin-Williams & Ream, 2007), an individual’s sexual orientation tends to stabilize during early adulthood. This developmental period is also categorized by the development of a secure sense of identity. Each of the three participants chose their current label within this developmental period, whether articulated through Arnett’s

(2000, 2004, 2007) model of Emerging Adulthood, capturing individuals 18–25, or Erikson’s (1968) model of Young Adulthood, capturing individuals 19–40. The findings, in light of a developmental perspective, suggest that it may be expected for individuals to commit to a label that they are familiar with during this time frame, when they are finding themselves, and make little effort to adjust this label as they learn of alternate language that may more accurately describe their experience.

Although the research has called the usefulness of labeling into question (Diamond, 2005; Epstein et al., 2012), and the findings of this study align with Diamond’s (2005) research to clearly express that labeling is not indicative of an individual’s full experience, these women have expressed a purpose for their labels. Through analysis of the data from the current study, each woman perceives various functions for their chosen label, ranging from the assertion of their beliefs and values (e.g., Ace identified as lesbian when trying to make a point to her parents), to the provision of safety and/or privilege from context to context (e.g., Tyler identified as straight to an employer), or a representation of the intersections of their identity (e.g., Ryan struggles to reconcile her West Indian culture with her sexual identity). Their knowledge and perception of what each of the labels mean, both by definition and in the context of their world(s), inform their choices. This study calls for a reframing of how we question the usefulness of labels —rather than questioning *if* they are useful, we should be questioning *what* they are useful for. Furthering Diamond’s (2005) emphasis on understanding the limits of labels and categorization as a foundation, it is critical to understand that labels may have a purpose beyond telling others who they are attracted

to, but providing insight into how the individual expresses themselves to others, why, and when: how she navigates her world. Even with the understanding that the commonly used labels “gay,” “lesbian,” and “bisexual” are insufficient when it comes to expressing the sexual identity of most individuals, they *may* be sufficient to express how an individual’s intersecting identities and associated privilege influence the expression of their sexual identity. As such, the focus when discussing an individual’s label is to help the individual to identify what that label means to them and how it relates to the individuals around them.

Furthermore, and contrary to the literature (Calzo et al., 2011) suggesting that the age of self-identification as non-heterosexual is younger than that of an individual’s first same-sex sexual experience, Ryan and Ace did not identify as gay or lesbian until well after their initial non-heterosexual intimate encounters. Categorically, Ryan and Ace were both sheltered from LGBTQ culture. Neither were able to identify a significant LGBTQ presence in their life until well after their initial non-heterosexual intimate encounters. However, Tyler was sure of her identity from a young age, before any sexual experience. Same-sex relationships had been normalized for Tyler for as long as she could remember. The findings suggest that the lack of awareness of non-heterosexual options for identification contributed to a delayed, drawn-out labeling process for both Ryan and Ace as they worked toward comfort, within and between contexts, with their non-heterosexual identities.

An individual’s knowledge and/or perception of labels over time directly reflects the pool of options from which they were selecting when committing to a label. An

understanding of the labeling language that an individual is and has historically been familiar with helps to justify their labeling choice. Additionally, and related to the implications of the study's findings, if an individual is able to articulate only a limited understanding or awareness of labels, providing a platform for learning about additional labels that may more closely align with their experience may help to validate their identity or identities in new ways. Individuals may often settle on language that is proverbially close enough, but once they are exposed to language that they perceive to more accurately capture their experience, they may feel less isolated (e.g., "this is a real thing!"), and can move toward deepening their acceptance of their identity.

The Label's Audience

As has been discussed, an individual's expression can vary greatly between contexts. A large component of those contexts is the audience that is in receipt of the label, or who an individual is telling that they are a lesbian, for example. A coworker? A student? A stranger? A group of non-heterosexual women? Characteristic differences between audiences can have a significant impact on the label that an individual chooses to express herself in that context.

The nature of an individual's identity, or even the salience of their identity, may have little impact on an individual's choice of label when specific audiences are involved. Sears' (2012) tenets of intersectionality remind us that various statuses, or identities, may carry both advantages and disadvantages – levels of power and privilege. While her selected label for the purposes of the study was lesbian, Ryan shared that she identifies as queer when she is with people who identify as queer, or gay when she is with people who

identify as gay or with other women with monosexual non-heterosexual identities who are not comfortable with the term lesbian. The use of those labels is still accurately representing her identity, but afford her more privilege by placing her in the majority with that particular audience.

Similarly, Tyler carried a label in high school at the suggestion of her audience – her peer group. Upon being labeled as a lesbian by her peers, Tyler adopted the label for no other reason than she did not have a different label that she felt strongly about.

However, she continued to consider the option of dating both men and women. She used the label to satisfy the need of her audience to categorize her according to the gender identity of her partner at the time, which aligns with Labeling Theory's (Becker, 1963) suggestion that labels are partially based on societal pressures.

However, the majority of the experiences shared by the three participants did not align with Becker's (1963) concept that once society (in this case, an individual's audience) recognizes a "deviant" behavior, such as a same-sex relationship, and assigns an appropriate label, an individual is encouraged to behave accordingly. In fact, though they may have used their assigned label in various contexts and points in time, none of the participants in this study seemed to be strongly influenced by the label assigned by their audiences. Ryan and Ace even seemed to take action *against* their assigned "deviant" label, with Ryan being labeled as lesbian by her peers while clinging to a bisexual label and trying to connect with men, and Ace identifying as bisexual to her parents and engaging in a long-term relationship with a man (who was not aware of her non-heterosexual identity), whilst knowing she preferred women.

Additionally, each of this study's participants spoke of their use of social media as it related to the expression of their identity. All three women described having used various social media platforms to meet other non-heterosexual women in the past. The perceived safety provided by communicating with a person (the audience) via social media made it easier for each of these women to express themselves to others. The use of social media has also eased, and continues to ease the process of expressing the nature of their sexual identities and associated labels. Specifically, Ryan and Ace expressed the significance of the ability to strategically and carefully out themselves via social media, to a controlled audience (through use of social media privacy settings). The expressed luxury of being able to expose specific parts of their lives, such as photos with a significant other, to people in their lives and gauge acceptance and support via responses to social media posts has helped them to not only become more comfortable with expressing their identity and label in person, but has moved them further toward finding comfort with themselves as well.

The label that an individual selects for use in a particular context can offer various insights. First, it can highlight their perception of the audience that they are met with in that context, at that time. Is their label accepted by the audience? Alternately, it can draw attention to dissonance that an individual may be experiencing. Why is an individual using a label that conflicts with the nature of their identity when expressing themselves to a particular audience? The participants in this study have navigated the choice of language to express their sexual identity to different audiences in many different ways throughout their lives, and continue to do so as needed.

Internalized Bias or Stigma

Finally, and by no means insignificantly, the findings of this study suggest that an individual's selected label could represent various degrees of internalized bias or stigma that they may be carrying with them. The history of sexual identity development, outlined in Chapter Two, suggests that the goal of sexual identity development is integration — becoming whole. However, this is easier said than done. The data from this study suggest that the values and beliefs associated with an individual's identities influence their label selection.

For example, the question for a Christian identified individual may be whether the label is the sin or the behavior is the sin; a Hispanic identified individual (such as in the pilot study) may struggle to determine if their obligation is to have a feminine gender expression or a heterosexual relationship. Particularly in Ryan's case, the selection of her current label has been, and continues to be a journey. She described wanting to be okay with the term lesbian because she *knows* that it is what she is, but the stigma and judgment attached to the term from her country of origin are so significant that she has trouble reconciling her new, American understanding of the term in context of her original, West Indian understanding of the term. At the opposite end of the spectrum, Tyler's expressed ability to articulate and label her sexual identity from a young age may be related to the fact that she was raised in an open, affirming home environment. She had, and continues to have, little to no internalized bias or stigma related her label(s).

Queer Theory (Halperin, 1995; Warner, 2004) contends that the goal is toward an understanding of all things as queer, or apart from an unachievable expectation of

perfection. However, Queer Theory, in and of itself, requires perfection with the mere suggestion of the possibility of the queering of all things. In the current, queer (imperfect) state of the world, it is unrealistic to expect individuals to label themselves based on an understanding of all identities being queer when the general public does not have that understanding. Stigma and bias against identities and associated labels beyond the norm are the norm. The data highlights the experience of an individual's need to navigate the level of stigma and bias that are woven into their identities, and the work that can be associated with said navigation. The individual's chosen label can speak volumes of their cultural background or family's perspective of their identity and how they have come to process it and integrate it into their full identity.

Findings in Relation to Existing Literature

The findings of this study are in many ways contrary to the generally accepted approach to sexual identity within the counseling discipline. These findings support a more contextual approach than has yet to be articulated in the mainstream literature. The study is also unique in separating the language that women use to label their sexual identity from all traditionally associated measures or variables. The label exists independently from other measures of sexual identity, and it is critical to understand the difference between identity development and labeling—to understand the two concepts as distinct from one another. Even within academia and by queer scholars, developmental models are applied to both concepts concurrently.

As previously discussed, D'Augelli's (1994a) model of homosexual identity development was approached from a more contextual, lifespan perspective. Aligning with

the findings of this study, the model acknowledges the interconnectedness of social, biological, and environmental influences on sexual identity. Moving the concept of sexual identity closer to a contextual understanding of sexual identity, this model helps to frame the findings of the current study but could evolve to include a more explicitly contextual approach to identity development. D'Augelli's (1994a) model most closely approximates a modern understanding of sexual identity, but the findings of this study highlight gaps in his conceptualization and its articulation, particularly related to the blurred boundaries between identity development and associated language.

The study's findings support Queer Theory (Warner, 2004), suggesting that there is no norm and the construct is not static; the option for relabeling is always available and regularly acted on. While Queer Theory compliments the nature of the study's findings, it does not address them explicitly. The preponderance of the existing literature in this area over the last 40 years is developmental in nature, but when you consider labeling, it must be couched in contextual literature, articulating the many influences that an individual's identities, relationships, and environments have on their expression.

While Labeling Theory (Becker, 1963) is the most obvious choice of literature related to this line of inquiry, it falls short of, and even contradictory to, the reality of an individual's label selection with its suggestion that a label influences an individual's behavior. A modern version of this theory, developed in light of this study's findings, would be more robust and complex, considering contextual variables across identities and defining their relationships with labels themselves. It would also provide a framework for deconstructing an individual's label to analyze the power and privilege that it carries

within and between contexts. This method of approaching a label from different perspectives —how an individual adopts the label as well as what the function of the label is —recognizes the label for the wealth of information it can offer about an individual, their contexts, and society as a whole.

Finally, and notably, the research on women's development presented in Chapter Two was complemented by the findings of this study. Much of the literature on women's development focuses on relationships and context, which the findings of this study actively identified as informing an individual's choice of label. Primarily, each participant's relationships had a role in shaping her identity and choices for expression (Helms, 1990; Ossana et al., 1992). The literature's (Brown & Gilligan, 1993; Gilligan, 1982) description of women's tendency to push their thoughts and feelings underground in order to maintain their relationships and care for others was echoed by the findings of this study. Each participant clearly and explicitly articulated patterns of putting the emotional experience of others in their lives above their own. These patterns directly informed their choice of label(s) and emphasize the importance of considering an individual's intersections in order to understand each individual identity.

Implications

As discussed in Chapter One, this study highlighted new information around the process of self-labeling for non-heterosexual women in early adulthood. This fresh information provides a renewed foundation from which to understand non-heterosexual self-identified women from various perspectives. It also provides an impetus to rethink the resounding developmental perspective of sexual identity within the counseling

discipline, for a more contextual perspective, suggesting that the developmental lens of the past may not be as relevant as it once was. Not only does the data reflect how women perceive the development of their label, but how intersecting identities and associated privilege influence a woman's chosen label. This study suggests that labels *do* carry a function, and *are* useful, but must be understood in a new context to allow for freedom *in* sexual expression and *from* judgment and persecution related to an individual's sexual identity. Armed with an understanding that an individual's label is a byproduct of the salience of their identities, nature of their identities, knowledge of labels, the audience for their label, and internalized bias or stigma, professional counselors can be better equipped to offer support.

Counselor Education

The current study has significant implications for counselor education and, in turn, counselor practice. Counselor educators must teach their students to acknowledge the potential significance of an individual's label and labeling process. By beginning at the source, with counseling students, the dissemination of this knowledge would not only be integrated into the students' personal approach to the profession, but it would also initiate a waterfall effect within the profession.

Prior to taking on the challenge of changing the landscape of the counseling profession's view of a label's role, counselor educators must have the information. The counseling profession must offer more workshops related to labels and intersectionality, while emphasizing the impact that these concepts may have on individuals. Workshops, in conjunction with attendance at relevant conference sessions and consumption of

appropriate literature and other media, will prepare the counselor educator to integrate the knowledge into their educational practice. Additionally, upon completion of additional research in this area, a deconstructed understanding of labels can be added to the ALGBTIC Competencies for Counseling with LGBQQIA Individuals (ALGBTIC LGBQQIA Competencies Taskforce, 2013).

Once equipped to do so, counselor education programs must prepare their students to break down the commonly understood function of labels. Counselor educators should train and encourage their students to broaden their understanding of an individual's label beyond its academic definition to understand it as providing a wealth of descriptive data about a client's experience. This will help students to conceptualize clients in context, using their label(s) as a jumping off point to begin to understand an individual's experience as it is situated in their environment. It will also help them to maintain a focus on intersectionality and how a client's social location influences their choices for expression.

The findings of this study can help counselor educators to understand the developmental significance of addressing personal meaning attached to an individual's label. Counselor educators should discuss personal meaning and labels in lifespan development courses and content, specifically related to both sexual identity development and construction, and development of women during early adulthood. Teaching counselors about sexual identity construction for women in early adulthood, with an emphasis on how these identities (sexual identity, gender identity, age cohort) interact

with one another will provide them with direction for conceptualizing clients in the future.

Additionally, the findings support the notion that an intersectional understanding of development and expression, inclusive of sexual identities, should be stressed by counselor educators in coursework pertaining to multicultural issues in counseling. Counseling students have been reporting a lack of preparation for work with the LGBTQ population for decades (Allison, Crawford, Echemendia, Robinson, & Knepp, 1994; Bidell, 2005; Bieschke et al., 2007; Croteau, Bieschke, Phillips, & Lark, 1998; Dillon et al., 2004; Fassinger, 1991; Murphy, Rawlings, & Howe, 2002; Phillips & Fischer, 1998). In the absence of an understanding of and appreciation for non-heterosexual identities, the behaviors of both counselor educators and, in turn, counselors can have a negative impact on this population (Pinto, 2014). It is the responsibility of the counselor educator to not only familiarize students with the range and nature of identities and expression that exist, but to help them to understand the relationships between identities.

Intersectionality should also be emphasized in coursework focused on case conceptualization and treatment planning. Educators must provide adequate opportunity for students to think critically about others. They must provide deep, descriptive case studies or role plays in which students have the opportunity to truly dig into another person and learn to look past the face value of labels.

The data from the current study suggests that an individual's label(s) can offer a rich cross-section of their life and experiences, with the power to inform the counseling relationship. Counselor educators must convey an understanding of what a label may

represent for an individual (e.g., the social locations in which they sense oppression, the internal struggles they may associate with their sexual identity, or their lack of awareness of labeling options), and how to gather a full, intersectional understanding of clients. The tendency of counselor educators to focus instruction on developmental models and approaches must be challenged, or, at minimum, paralleled by contextual approaches to identity construction. Educators must shift from a strictly developmental approach to an approach that is explicitly inclusive of an individual's context. The resulting knowledge, awareness, and skill may better position counselors to identify sources of dissonance that a client is struggling with, and to design interventions focused on those sources instead of the associated symptoms.

Counselor Practice

The implications suggested for counselor educators will change the way future counselors conceptualize sexual identity labels, potentially setting a new standard for how professional counselors approach the concept. However, current counseling practitioners would be well-served to adjust their understanding of others as well. The current study provides a platform, as well as a call to action, for practitioners to adjust their perspective in a way that accommodates this new information.

The findings of this study inform the counseling practitioner's cultural competency as a whole, along with their ability to recognize salient intersecting identities. An advanced understanding of intersectionality, as expressed through this study, will prompt the helper to explore influences behind label selection, ultimately highlighting the most salient aspects of a client's life. This has the potential to inform a

practitioner's clinical approach to all clients, regardless of presenting issue or sexual identity. By understanding labels as having the potential to represent many different dimensions of an individual's life, and a jumping off point for conversation in session, counselors would be equipped with a new tool toward exploring a client's worldview. Equipped with knowledge of the most influential parts of a client's life, the counselor may be better prepared to more directly influence change around a client's presenting issues.

Additionally, a focus on how an individual's label for their sexual identity interacts with the other pieces of their lives will help the practitioner to identify sources of cognitive dissonance and general incongruence, leading to the identification of possible sources of psychological distress (Rogers, 1959; Rosario et al., 2006). The importance of approaching individuals in context cannot be understated. While it is critical to understand an individual from a developmental perspective, practitioners must simultaneously consider contextual influences on an individual's identity and expression. One identity cannot exist apart from its counterparts for a specific individual, and practitioners must take the time to understand what language truly means from client to client.

Finally, this study highlights the importance of exposure to varied identity options and representation in the media to help clients accurately identify their lived experience. The responsibility of the counselor is to not only help their clients dig through their intersections and associated power and privilege, but to expose the client to information (e.g., media, language) that will broaden their perspective of their own experience. This

can take place through various forms of psychoeducation, as well as connecting clients to the specific populations within their communities that may complement identities of concern.

Advocacy

The implications of the findings of this study extend beyond the education of future counselors and counseling practitioners to include opportunities for advocacy toward a widespread understanding and associated changes based on this new information. While this study was focused specifically on sexual identity, it informs practice beyond a focus on sexual identity, calling for advocacy toward supporting a contextual perspective of human nature across all identities. Opportunities for advocacy around the use of language, and toward a more contextual understanding of others, can be found in any setting. However, counseling consultants and school counselors have a unique opportunity to effect change in this area.

The nature of the counseling consultant, working in variety of settings in which counselors are employed, lends itself to a wide field of potential impact. Counseling consultants can use this fresh understanding of labeling and language to inform clients (e.g., organizations, private practices, schools) of new ways to connect with and affirm the populations with whom they are working. By providing new information and awareness around the potential insight offered by an individual's label, consultants can prompt their clients to revisit their practices in light of the populations they are currently serving or would like to be serving. This will help to identify gaps in services and/or staffing, opportunities for educational campaigns, varied and/or targeted marketing

approaches, and potential course corrections toward a more inclusive, intersectional approach.

Additionally, school counselors can operationalize this information to be more proactive with their student programming. Understanding that an individual's school years are some of the most influential of their lives, school counselors can help students to perceive labels and associated experiences in context from a young age. Efforts can range from general programming or educational campaigns to individual interactions with students, helping to break down expectations of fitting perfectly into a label, promoting the idea that labels are just words, and do/should not dictate past or future experience or labels.

Future Research

This study calls for further research related to how an individual selects a label for their sexual identity and what that label represents. Specifically related to the scope and limitations of the current study, additional research could address a similar research question with individuals who identify themselves using varied identities and intersections, or with a different methodology. Using the findings of the current study to inform additional research on other populations, these approaches could push the line of inquiry toward generalizability of the findings.

This study informs the development of theory around how an individual selects a label for their sexual identity from both a conscious and subconscious point of view. The five themes identified as contributing to an individual's selection of their label (salience of their identities, nature of their identities, knowledge of labels, the audience for their

label, and internalized bias or stigma), lay the groundwork for a holistic perspective of label development. It also contributes to the literature regarding the impact of various identities on an individual's sexual identity.

The findings suggest that an individual's self-selected label for their sexual identity does not express the entirety of their past, present, or future experience, but is largely influenced by the individuals around them. It will help professional counselors as well as the general population to understand one another, shedding light on what a label could mean outside of its textbook definition, and how our behavior may impact others. It will also inform future research on the role of labels and their development, and suggests that additional depth regarding sexual identity development must be pursued within the literature, with more attention to intersectionality and how it manifests within individuals.

The Creation of Portraits

The use of Portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997) allows for an exploration of the whole of an individual's experience as it relates to the research question. Additional research using this methodology would provide rich data regarding the experience of individuals with vastly different backgrounds and characteristics from the participants in the current study. This could provide a full depiction of what goes into the development or selection of a label for populations influenced by different sociocultural contexts.

First, it may be useful to expand the pool of participants of the current study to include additional individuals of the same cultural backgrounds, or the same salient identities, as the current participants, or to include individuals from different geographic

regions. The current study identified influencing characteristics that were associated with the expression of participants' identities. However, the suggested study, maintaining the Portraiture methodology (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997), would help to identify whether the themes that emerged from this study are culturally and regionally consistent and inclusive, or if the participants' experiences and associated themes were unique to their specific intersections or the manifestation(s) of their identities. Data from this type of research would directly inform the next steps in this line of inquiry.

Additionally, performing a similar study with different age ranges or groups may provide insight into the cohort effect (Baunach, 2012; Kozloski, 2010; McCormack et al., 2014) related to the selection of a label. Not only does the literature (Baunach, 2012; Kozloski, 2010; McCormack et al., 2014) suggest that cohort effect may impact this process, but the findings of this study suggest a number of influences that may also be impacted by generational differences. The current study highlighted potential cohort influences on individuals in early adulthood, such as social media, visibility of LGBTQ identities in society, and the development of inclusive language. However, the experience of both older and younger cohorts would likely vary. Portraits generated from such research would feed into the refinement of the themes generated from the current study, while holding the experience of each participant as unique and valuable.

Researchers (Bader, 2009; Diamond & Butterworth, 2008; Peplau & Garnets, 2000) have acknowledged various gender differences as they may relate to the process of sexual identity label selection. The current study addressed how the participants' current labels may intersect with their gender roles and identities. Completing a similar study

with a sample of participants who do not identify their gender identity as ‘woman’ may provide insight regarding the differences in how varied gender identities weigh their different identities, and how those identities and their salience subsequently impact their labeling choices.

In addition to a study with individuals of varied gender identities, it may also be beneficial to study individuals of varied experiences related to sexual or romantic behavior. For example, during participant recruitment for the current study, a woman contacted me who has been in a committed relationship with another woman for several years, but this was her first same-sex relationship, and she explained that she identifies as straight but fell in love with a woman. A labeling study with a sample of women who identify as heterosexual but have had *sexual* relationships with women, or a sample of women who identify as heterosexual but have had *romantic* relationships with women would reveal the other side of the current study. Data from these populations would highlight the influences related to their choices to identify as heterosexual, even having experienced same-sex relationships to varying degrees.

A Departure from Portraiture

While the use of Portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997) provides incredible insight into an individual’s experience, the use of different methodology could push the line of inquiry forward in different ways. Designing and implementing a general qualitative study with a larger sample size, and allowing it to be informed by the findings from the current and other studies using Portraiture, would provide a more significant breadth of response to this line of inquiry. This study could include brief, semi-structured

interviews and focus groups, where the researcher called on knowledge provided by the portraits described in the current study to have focused conversations with many participants. Holding focus groups would allow participants the opportunity to learn about the experiences of one another and how their experiences may relate. While the current study identified influences that were salient for the three participants, a greater breadth of data would allow patterns of influences to be identified more definitively. Those patterns would provide a foundation for the development of theory and additional research.

This line of inquiry would also eventually benefit from a quantitative approach to the research question, generating large-scale statistical data concerning the impact of various identities on the sexual identity self-labeling process. As previously suggested, the findings of this study are not generalizable, given the limited scope of the research, consistent with the methodology. However, the implications inform further inquiry and establish a foundation for theory. With additional qualitative research, as described above, to serve as a foundation, a quantitative study designed to analyze the statistical relationships between and salience of various identities on the sexual identity label selection process would allow for a more generalizable, intersectional understanding of the concept in question.

Informing Methodology

This study provides insight into the use of methodology for future research. First, the practical application of intersectionality as a theoretical framework is provided. Furthermore, the current study informs the use of portraiture as a research methodology.

Using this research as a catalyst to build on existing methodological literature will contribute to the accessibility of the approaches.

The methodology used in this study contributes to the practice of using intersectionality as a framework for research. With a growing understanding of the need for a focus on intersectionality, it is critical to identify best practices in taking an intersectional approach to research. The current study highlighted a number of concepts to be mindful of when conducting intersectional research. These include helping an individual to articulate their identities, what their identities mean to them, how their identities manifest in their lives, and whether or not an individual's identities fit for them and why. It is also important to be attentive to how individuals communicate their identities to other people, how power and privilege attached to certain identities push and pull on other identities, how an individual's identities are connected to one another, and where they see pieces of identities in other identities. Articulation and refinement of characteristics of intersectional research will contribute to the usability of the framework and, ultimately, additional research from an intersectional perspective.

Portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1986; Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997) is a complex, beautiful method of capturing the experience of others. However, the use of Portraiture as a methodology carries challenges, which were highlighted by the current study. These challenges include, but are not limited to, the length of the product generated by the methodology, the comparatively loose structure of the approach, and the departure from commonplace academic writing that is required to generate Portraits as

described by Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997). Research into the use of Portraiture, in light of these challenges, would inform future research using this methodology.

Limitations

Upon selection of the participants and completion of the data collection and analysis, a variety of limitations to this study were both realized and confirmed. As previously indicated, Portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1986; Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997) carries its own limitations and challenges. While many of the limitations confronted during this study were inherent in and important to the selected methodology, they had the potential to impact the findings of the study in different ways. Limitations included social locations/identities (sexual identity, geographic area, age cohort, gender identity, religious affiliation), recruitment method, and size of pool.

Identities and (Social) Locations

Per the study's intentional use of purposeful sampling, each of the three participants shared a number of social locations and identities. The selected parameters for this study required that each participant identified as a woman, did not identify as heterosexual, and was between 26 and 35 years of age. Additional overlapping social locations, by chance rather than design, included residence within close proximity to a large, liberal city in the northeastern United States, and familiarity with and access to queer resources and communities. Each participant also conveyed a relative feeling of safety as it relates to their sexual identities, as well as various degrees of Christian traditions or beliefs. As such, this study conveys in-depth narratives of this particular

group of participants, with these particular identities, but cannot do the same for individuals outside of this group.

Recruitment Method

Furthermore, the participants were recruited by word of mouth. While this was by design and brought a more immediate level of comfort and rapport between the portraitist and the participant, it may have also limited or tainted the information that the participant shared or was willing to share. This may have happened if participants had reservations about the confidentiality of the process, or if the participant perceived that the portraitist already knew certain information about them. This method of recruitment also limited the pool to individuals who are, to some degree, out of the closet.

Size of Pool

The study was limited to three participants, which influenced the variability of experience represented by the study. This sample size was appropriate for the methodology, offering great depth, but limited breadth of data. Similar to the limitations around identities and social locations, the generalizability of the implications must be placed in context of the sample size. A larger pool may highlight components of the labeling process that were not generated by the participants in this study.

While each of the aforementioned limitations may have impacted the findings in different ways, the themes may have held true. Exploration of the limitations through additional research would inform the themes that contribute to the selection of an individual's label, offering data to build and refine the themes as necessary.

Conclusion

To increase awareness and understanding of the sexual identity labeling process, as well as an intersectional approach to identity development, counseling students, educators, and practitioners must continue the research trajectory suggested by the current study. Subsequently, the data from the current and additional studies must be published, presented, challenged, and refined. The dissemination of the information generated by this line of inquiry should not be restricted to academic environments, but should be paralleled by a goal of disseminating the information to the general public.

There is a responsibility related to the findings of this research to generate accessible information, helping people to understand themselves and one another in new ways. This may be accomplished through the offering of workshops within communities (e.g., community centers, churches), partnering with schools, publishing outside of academic journals, and a commitment to identifying and pursuing new avenues for education and discussion. Every part of our lives can be impacted by working toward an intersectional perspective of others.

The importance of visibility cannot be overstated. As suggested by the participants of this study, the ability to see and meet individuals like themselves can be life changing. Access to media and communities related to minority identities and expression helps individuals to understand themselves in different ways, and to become more comfortable with the idea that the nature of their identity may be part of the normal range of individuals in a given culture.

As previously mentioned, this information not only helps individuals to understand themselves, but to understand others. Through broad, intentional dissemination of results of this, and future studies, the public's understanding of individuals who are different than themselves may be impacted. While creating change on this level is slow and difficult, small steps can be made toward creating a culture that fosters less internalized bias, or serves as a warm, inviting audience for expression of differences.

The purpose of this study was to capture and portray the experiences of women regarding the selection of the language used to express their sexual identity. Each of the three women who participated in this study shared a rich, unique experience related to the selection of the label for their sexual identity. Through thoughtful exploration of the most significant portions of their lives, the importance of obtaining an understanding of the language used to express an individual's sexual identity is emphasized. This study ultimately suggests that the labeling process for sexual identity is multidimensional in nature, an indicative piece of an individual's larger identity, and must be held in context of the constellation of an individual's social locations.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Call for Participants

Hello,

Thank you for your interest in participating in an IRB-approved, student-led research study on sexual identity development. My name is Stacy Pinto. I am a fifth year doctoral student in Counselor Education at Montclair State University. I am currently seeking participants between the ages of 26 and 35 who identify as women, and do not identify as heterosexual.

I plan to use qualitative methods to research this topic, specifically in-depth interviews. The interview process will consist of three interviews, each lasting approximately 90 minutes. The interviews will be held at a location that is convenient for you, or via electronic meeting software. I will audio-record the interviews, in order to analyze the data at a later date. During each interview, I will ask a variety of questions that explore themes related to your sexual identity. These questions will include general background information, intersecting identities, sexual experiences, and sexual preferences. You will also be given the opportunity to share personal artifacts such as photos or journals. This study creates the opportunity for strong emotional reactions to questions, and possible discomfort regarding the material to be discussed. Additionally, during the course of the interviews, you may become restless or bored and want to discontinue your participation. You will be free to skip questions that you do not wish to answer, or to stop the interview at any time.

All information will remain confidential. I plan to share my findings through publication and presentation through relevant professional outlets. Please be aware that all identifying information (i.e. names, places, dates) will be changed to protect your privacy. Note that there is no compensation for participating in this study. If you are interested in scheduling an interview, please contact me with your availability and we will schedule an interview accordingly. Do not hesitate to contact me with any questions regarding this study. Thank you for your interest!

Regards,
Stacy Pinto
pintost@mail.montclair.edu
(973) 655 – 4235

Appendix B: Participant Screening Survey

Participant Screening Survey

1. Today's date: ____ / ____ / ____

2. Age: _____

3. Religious/Spiritual Affiliation, if any:

4. Race:

5. Ethnicity:

6. Do you identify as a woman? (circle one)	YES	NO
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7. Do you identify as heterosexual? (circle one)	YES	NO
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Appendix C: Consent Form for Adults

Consent Form for Adults

Please read below with care. You can ask questions at any time, now or later. You can talk to other people before you sign this form.

Study's Title: The Sexual Identity Labeling Process for Non-Heterosexual Women in Early Adulthood: A Qualitative Inquiry Based in Portraiture

Why is this study being done? The purpose of this study is to better understand how women between the ages of 26 and 35, who do not identify as heterosexual, come to identify the process and label for their sexual identity.

What will happen while you are in the study? As a participant in this study, you complete a demographic questionnaire and participate in a series of three 90-minute interviews. The initial interview will open with the questionnaire, which will be followed by general discussion around various topic areas related to sexual identity development and labeling, including general background information and sexual preferences. Each subsequent interview will also consist of general discussion around similar topic areas, as well as the opportunity to share artifacts with the interviewer. All interviews will be audio recorded.

Time: This study will take approximately four to six hours, broken up between three separately scheduled interviews, as previously mentioned.

Risks: Although we will keep your identity confidential as it relates to this research project, if we learn of any suspected child or elder abuse, or harm to yourself or others, we are required by NJ state law to report that to the proper authorities immediately.

This study creates the opportunity for strong emotional reactions to questions, and possible discomfort regarding the material being discussed. Additionally, during the course of the 90 minute interviews, you may become restless or bored and want to discontinue your participation. You are free to skip questions that you do not wish to answer, or to stop the interview at any time.

Finally, given the nature of the study and qualitative research as a whole, complete anonymity cannot be guaranteed if you have shared or plan to share the same information with the researcher as with other people in your life. To help safeguard your anonymity, identifying information (i.e. names, places, dates) will not be included in presentations or publications.

Benefits: You may benefit from this study because many of the questions have the potential to help you better or differently understand your own experience and expression

of your sexual identity. The study will contribute to the research on women's sexual identity development and the associated processes.

Who will know that you are in this study? You will not be linked to any presentations. We will keep who you are confidential. Your interview(s) will be transcribed and the audio recording will be destroyed within 14 days of the interview date. All identifying information within the transcription (such as specific names or places) will be removed. A pseudonym will be used when your data is used for presentations and publications. Both names and places will be changed. Data from this study may be kept for future use. The data will be stored in a password protected file on a password protected computer.

Do you have to be in the study? You do not have to be in this study. You are a volunteer! It is okay if you want to stop at any time and not be in the study. You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to answer. Nothing will happen to you.

Do you have any questions about this study? Contact the Principal Investigator, Stacy Pinto, Doctoral Student in the Counselor Education PhD program, within the department of Counseling & Educational Leadership, at The Graduate School, College Hall room 226, (973) 655-4235, pintost@mail.montclair.edu. You may also contact the Faculty Sponsor Investigator, Dr. Kathryn Herr, at the Department of Educational Foundations, University Hall, 2nd Floor, room 2161, (973) 655-6845, herrk@montclair.edu.

Do you have any questions about your rights as a research participant? Phone or email the IRB Chair, Dr. Katrina Bulkley, at 973-655-5189 or reviewboard@mail.montclair.edu.

Future Studies: It is okay to use my data in other studies:

Please initial: _____ Yes _____ No

As part of this study, it is okay to audiotape me:

Please initial: _____ Yes _____ No

One copy of this consent form is for you to keep.

Statement of Consent: I have read this form and decided that I will participate in the project described above. Its general purposes, that particulars of involvement, and possible risks and inconveniences have been explained to my satisfaction. I understand that I can withdraw at any time. My signature also indicates that I am 18 years of age or older and have received a copy of this consent form.

Print your name here

Sign your name here

Date

_____ Name of Principal Investigator	_____ Signature	_____ Date
_____ Name of Faculty Sponsor	_____ Signature	_____ Date

Appendix D: Demographic Questionnaire

1. Today's Date: _____/_____/_____
2. Age at time of initial interview: _____
3. Highest Level of Education

<input type="checkbox"/> Some high school	<input type="checkbox"/> High school graduate	<input type="checkbox"/> Some college
<input type="checkbox"/> College graduate	<input type="checkbox"/> Masters level coursework	<input type="checkbox"/> Masters Degree
<input type="checkbox"/> Doctoral level coursework	<input type="checkbox"/> Doctoral Degree	
4. Occupation, if any:

☐ Unemployed
5. Religious/Spiritual Affiliation, if any:

☐ No affiliation
6. Current label for sexual identity, if any:

☐ No label
7. Previous label(s) for sexual identity, if any, and associated timeline:

☐ No previous label(s)
8. Romantic orientation/identity:

☐ Heteroromantic ☐ Homoromantic ☐ Biromantic ☐ Other: _____
9. Pronouns:

☐ She/her/hers ☐ He/him/his ☐ They/them/theirs ☐ Other: _____

10. Relationship orientation (check all that apply):

☐ Non-Monogamous ☐ Monogamous ☐ Other: _____

11. Sexual attraction/orientation:

☐ Asexual ☐ Gray-A ☐ Demi-sexual ☐ Sexual

12. Race:

☐ American Indian or Alaska Native ☐ Asian

☐ Black or African American ☐ Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander

☐ White ☐ Other: _____

13. Ethnicity: ☐ Hispanic or Latinx ☐ Not Hispanic or Latinx ☐ Unknown

14. Gender Identity: _____

15. Marital Status: ☐ Single ☐ Married ☐ Divorced ☐ Widowed ☐ Dating

16. Children: ☐ Children ☐ No Children

Appendix E: Interview Prompts

The Primary Investigator (PI) will focus on the following areas throughout each of three interviews with each of the participants. Possible prompts related to each topic area are included below:

Interview #1

- Current and historical sexual identity label
 - o Talk about your current label for your sexual identity.
 - o What figured into the selection of your label?
 - o What labeling options were/are you aware of/have you considered?
- Behaviors related to sexual identity label
 - o How do your behaviors with intimate partners related to your label?
 - o How does your intimate partner history relate to your label?
- Relationships as they relate to sexual identity label (i.e. family, community, partner, career)
 - o Do any of your friends or family identify differently than you in terms of sexual identity?
 - o Describe your current and historical involvement with the LGB community.
- Review and discussion of artifacts
 - o How did you select these artifacts to share with me?
 - o What do these artifacts mean to you?

Interview #2

- Member checking
 - o What have you been thinking about since our previous interview?
 - o I have been thinking about [insert content]. What is your feedback on my thoughts?
- Religion and/or Spirituality
 - o How has religion or spirituality influenced your label?
 - o Has your label influenced your choices related to religion or spirituality?
- Race and/or Ethnicity
 - o How has your race and/or ethnicity intersected with your label?
 - o Did your race and/or ethnicity influence your selection of a label?
- Review and discussion of artifacts
 - o How did you select these artifacts to share with me?
 - o What do these artifacts mean to you?

Interview #3

- Member checking
 - o What have you been thinking about since our previous interview?
 - o I have been thinking about [insert content]. What is your feedback on my thoughts?
- Review and discussion of artifacts
 - o How did you select these artifacts to share with me?
 - o What do these artifacts mean to you?

Appendix F: MSU IRB Approval



Institutional Review Board
College Hall, Room 248
Office: 973-655-3021
Fax: 973-655-3022
www.montclair.edu/irb
reviewboard@mail.montclair.edu

December 20, 2016

Ms. Stacy Pinto Wahlstrom
36 Homestead Lane
Lincoln Park, NJ 07035

Re: IRB Number: **001573**

Project Title: **The Pathway to Sexual Orientation Self Identification for Women: A Pilot Study**

Dear Ms. Pinto Wahlstrom:

After a full 4 review, Montclair State University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved this study's amendment on **December 14, 2016**. It is valid through the current approved period and will expire on **September 16, 2017**.

Before requesting amendments, extensions, or project closure, please reference MSU's IRB website and download the [current forms](#).

Should you wish to make changes to the IRB-approved procedures, prior to the expiration of your approval, submit your requests using the Amendment form.

For Continuing Review, it is advised that you submit your form 60 days before the month of the expiration date above. If you have not received MSU's IRB approval by your study's expiration date, ALL research activities must STOP, including data analysis. If your research continues without MSU's IRB approval, you will be in violation of Federal and other regulations.

After your study is completed, submit your Project Completion form.

If you have any questions regarding the IRB requirements, please contact me at 973-655-5189, reviewboard@mail.montclair.edu, or the Institutional Review Board.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Katrina Bulkley".

Dr. Katrina Bulkley
IRB Chair

cc: Dr. Kathryn Herr, Faculty Sponsor

Appendix G: Pilot – Call for Participants

Hello! Thank you for your interest in participating in a student-led research study on sexual orientation identity development. My name is Stacy Pinto. I am a third year doctoral student in Counselor Education at Montclair State University. I am currently seeking participants between the ages of 22 and 35 who identify as female, and do not identify as heterosexual.

I plan to use qualitative methods to research this topic, specifically in-depth interviews. These interview sessions will last 60-90 minutes, and will be held at a location that is convenient for you. I will audio-record the interviews, in order to analyze the data at a later date. During the session, I will ask a variety of questions that explore themes related to your sexual orientation identity development. These questions will include general background information, sexual experiences, and sexual preferences. This study creates the opportunity for strong emotional reactions to questions, and possible discomfort regarding the material being discussed. Additionally, during the course of the 60-90 minute interview, you may become restless or bored and want to discontinue your participation. You will be free to skip questions that you do not wish to answer, or to stop the interview at any time.

All information will remain confidential. I plan to share my findings through publication and presentation through relevant professional outlets. Please be aware that all identifying information (i.e. names, places, dates) will be changed to protect your privacy. Note that there is no compensation for participating in this study. If you are interested in scheduling an interview, please contact me with your availability and we will schedule an interview accordingly. Do not hesitate to contact me with any questions regarding this study. Thank you for your interest!

Regards,

Stacy Pinto

pintost@mail.montclair.edu

(973) 655 – 4235

Appendix H: Pilot – Consent Form for Adults

Please read below with care. You can ask questions at any time, now or later. You can talk to other people before you sign this form.

Study's Title: The Pathway to Sexual Orientation Self Identification for Women: A Pilot Study

Why is this study being done? The purpose of this study is to better understand how individuals between the ages of 22 and 35, who identify as female and do not identify as heterosexual, come to identify the process and label for their sexual orientation.

What will happen while you are in the study? As a participant in this study, you will be asked to complete a brief demographic questionnaire. Following the questionnaire, the researcher will ask you a series of open-ended questions regarding general background information, sexual experiences, and sexual preferences. The entire session will be audio recorded.

Time: This study will take about 60-90 minutes.

Risks: Although we will keep your identity confidential as it relates to this research project, if we learn of any suspected child abuse we are required by NJ state law to report that to the proper authorities immediately.

This study creates the opportunity for strong emotional reactions to questions, and possible discomfort regarding the material being discussed. Additionally, during the course of the 60-90 minute interview, you may become restless or bored and want to discontinue your participation. You are free to skip questions that you do not wish to answer, or to stop the interview at any time.

Finally, given the nature of the study and qualitative research as a whole, complete anonymity cannot be guaranteed if you have shared or plan to share the same information with the researcher as with other people in your life. To help safeguard your anonymity, identifying information (i.e. names, places, dates) will not be included in presentations or publications.

Benefits: You may benefit from this study because many of the questions have the potential to help you better or differently understand your own experience and expression of your sexual identity. The study will contribute to the research on women's sexual identity development and processes.

Who will know that you are in this study? You will not be linked to any presentations. We will keep who you are confidential. Your interview(s) will be transcribed and the audio recording will be destroyed within seven days of the interview date. All identifying

information within the transcription (such as specific names or places) will be removed. A pseudonym will be used when your data is used for presentations and publications. Both names and places will be changed. Data from this study may be kept for future use. The data will be stored in a password protected file on a password protected computer.

Do you have to be in the study? You do not have to be in this study. You are a volunteer! It is okay if you want to stop at any time and not be in the study. You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to answer. Nothing will happen to you.

Do you have any questions about this study? Contact the Principal Investigator, Stacy Pinto, Doctoral Student in the Counselor Education PhD program, within the department of Counseling & Educational Leadership, at The Graduate School, College Hall room 226, (973) 655-4235, pintost@mail.montclair.edu. You may also contact the Faculty Sponsor Investigator, Dr. Kathryn Herr, at Department of Educational Foundations, University Hall room 2161, (973) 655-6845, herrk@mail.montclair.edu.

Do you have any questions about your rights as a research participant? Phone or email the IRB Chair, Dr. Katrina Bulkley, at 973-655-5189 or reviewboard@mail.montclair.edu.

Future Studies: It is okay to use my data in other studies:

Please initial: _____ Yes _____ No

As part of this study, it is okay to audiotape me:

Please initial: _____ Yes _____ No

One copy of this consent form is for you to keep.

Statement of Consent: I have read this form and decided that I will participate in the project described above. Its general purposes, that particulars of involvement, and possible risks and inconveniences have been explained to my satisfaction. I understand that I can withdraw at any time. My signature also indicates that I am 18 years of age or older and have received a copy of this consent form.

Print your name here

Sign your name here

Date

Name of Principal Investigator

Signature

Date

Name of Faculty Sponsor

Signature

Date

Appendix I: Pilot – Demographic Questionnaire

Age	
Highest Level of Education	Some high school High school graduate Some college College graduate Graduate level coursework Master's degree Doctoral degree
Occupation	
Religious/Spiritual Affiliation	
Sexual Orientation	
Race	
Ethnicity	

Appendix J: Pilot – Interview Prompts

(the PI is likely to use prompts similar to the following)

1. Talk about your pathway to your current sexual orientation self-identity.
2. How have the eras in your life impacted your sexual orientation self-identity?
3. How do your behaviors and your sexual orientation self-identity relate?
4. Discuss your friends, family, and community and how they relate to your sexual orientation self-identity.
5. If spirituality or religion is a part of your life, how has it influenced your sexual orientation self-identity?
6. Is there anything else that you associate with your pathway to your sexual orientation self-identity that I haven't asked?

Appendix K: Pilot – MSU IRB Approval for Study

Institutional Review Board
College Hall, Room 248
Office: 973-655-3021
Fax: 973-655-3022
www.montclair.edu/irb
reviewboard@mail.montclair.edu

September 17, 2015

Ms. Stacy Pinto
2310 Crossing Way
Wayne, NJ 07470

Re: IRB Number: **001573**

Project Title: **The Pathways to Sexual Orientation Self Identification for Women: A Pilot Study**

Dear Ms. Pinto:

After a full 4 review, Montclair State University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved your Continuing Review request on **September 16, 2015**. The continuation is valid for one year and will expire on **September 16, 2016**.

Before requesting amendments, extensions, or project closure, please reference MSU's IRB website and download the current forms.

Should you wish to make changes to the IRB-approved procedures, prior to the expiration of your approval, submit your requests using the Amendment form.

For Continuing Review, it is advised that you submit your form 60 days before the month of the expiration date above. If you have not received MSU's IRB approval by your study's expiration date, ALL research activities must STOP, including data analysis. If your research continues without MSU's IRB approval, you will be in violation of Federal and other regulations.

After your study is completed, submit your Project Completion form.

If you have any questions regarding the IRB requirements, please contact me at 973-655-5189, reviewboard@mail.montclair.edu, or the Institutional Review Board.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Katrina Bulkley".

Dr. Katrina Bulkley
IRB Chair

cc: Dr. Kathryn Herr, Faculty Sponsor
Ms. Amy Aiello, Graduate School

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